Jeffrey J. Kripal

THE Superhumanities

Historical Precedents, Moral Objections, New Realities

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de impossibili facere possibile

for Stephen, Sravana, Benjamin, Alana, Jess, and John,
superhumans all

Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?

RALPH WALDO EMERSON, *Nature* (1836)

Humans fear the supernatural, both the undivine (the animal impulses such as sexuality, the unconscious, the unknown, the alien) and the divine (the superhuman, the god in us). Culture and religion seek to protect us from these two forces.

GLORIA ANZALDÚA, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987)

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PROLOGUE

Teaching the Superman

> In the ordinariness of each of us there had to be a place of rest, of relief. I didn't yet grasp the implications of this except that [Clark Kent as] Superman seemed to highlight that common condition because in him the extremes were so much greater. . . . The sharp contrast between the self as nonentity and the self as all-powerful seemed to suggest a secret, private, but universal experience.
>
> ALVIN SCHWARTZ, "The Real Secret of Superman's Identity"

By vocation or calling, I am a teacher. More specifically, I teach people how to think about what we have come to call religion. I teach people to think about religion *comparatively*—that is, across cultures and times, with no particular religion privileged above the others. I teach people to think about religion *critically*—that is, with all the tools of the modern university, including the humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences. I teach people to think about religion *historically*—that is, with a clear understanding that every religious form was created by humans at some point in space and time for specific and local reasons that privileged some and marginalized others.

But that is not all. And that is not enough. I have long insisted on something special or something left over that none of these ways and days can quite capture or explain. I have long insisted on the strange, the fantastic, the misbehaving or rogue aspects of religious experience that interact not only with other people but with the physical environment, with the material cosmos. And so I also teach people to think about religion *experientially* and, perhaps most controversially, *empirically*. With such adverbs, I mean to argue that religious ideas and symbolic expressions might sometimes function, rarely but really, as imaginative cultural translations of actual human encounters with consciousness and the cosmos, including aspects that no scientific mode of knowing can touch for one simple but profound reason: because they are not things or objects to touch, much less measure and manipulate.

Go ahead. Try. Some people, with the right mix of education and secularism, can manage some approximation of the comparative, critical, and

historical parts. Some people, with the right extraordinary life events, will be able to imagine the experiential or empirical part. But almost no one can put them together. It is as if our cultures will not allow us, as if they are protecting their own fragile natures through some kind of refusal to look too closely, some distraction from the essence of things, some immunological response cloaked as a belief, an argument, an ego, a set of values, whatever.

Because I have written about how mystical or paranormal experiences are basically signs or signals from outside this matrix of history, belief, ego, and culture, young intellectuals often come to me wanting to study some pretty weird things. Actually, what they most want to do is study *only* these things. They want to become Professors of the Paranormal.

I don't let them do that. To explain why, I tell a little pop-cultural parable that is, like all such parables, culturally specific and gendered. I do the polite thing, which is the right thing. I apologize for that cultural and gendered limitation, and then I tell them the story anyway. It seems to help more often than not, so I keep telling it. It goes like this.

"I know you want to be Superman," I tell them. "I know that there is an X factor behind your desire to give your life to years of graduate study that may not result in the paying job or professional career for which you now want to work so hard. Ordinary people don't do that. It makes no sense. Unless, of course, something has happened to you, unless you know that the world is not what it seems to be, unless you know that *you* are not what you seem to be. I am guessing that this has already happened to you. I am guessing that you know that, deep down, you are Superman.

"But here's the thing. No one will hire Superman. Superman *never* gets a job. If you come here to study with us, we will privately affirm and even help you cultivate the Superman, but we will also insist that you learn to be Clark Kent. Only Clark gets a job. *You can't just be Superman*. You have to put on your glasses and pretend to be someone else. You have to learn things you may not want to learn, whose utility and value you will only see later, maybe much later. You have to go to the *Daily Planet* every day and write this and that little thing.

"Consider this particular graduate school your phone booth, that magical place in those silly older comics where Clark Kent turns into Superman and Superman turns back into Clark Kent. We're like that. The secret of this kind of higher education is not about being one or the other. The secret is in the phone booth. The secret is learning *how to be both*, but also *when* to be *which*."[1]

That, in a pop-cultural nutshell, is the message of this book. It is a bit more complicated than that, of course. It gets weirder. Way weirder.

Sometimes, for example, this "teaching the Superman" gets more literal, gets real, becomes a matter of life and death.

It was November 2018. I had invited one of my advanced PhD students to a private symposium at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, on "Evolution and Deification." I asked him to tell the group a story that he had told me before and that I had written about in my own work as the story of "James."[2]

James grew up in a fundamentalist Christian family in West Texas. He was pulled from "Satan's public school system" so that he could be indoctrinated into absolute truths like creationism and the literal truth of the Bible. He also experienced excruciating guilt around his emerging sexuality. By the time he was a teenager, James was severely conflicted, emotionally tortured, really. He had, in fact, become suicidal.

One night, his parents were out. James decided that he would use the opportunity to kill himself—blow his head off with his dad's pistol in the gun safe, which was left unlocked that night. That would end it all.

But that didn't happen. Instead, James found himself falling into a kind of mild trance while he drove around town and, in his own words, "Ouija drove" to the local Barnes & Noble, a business and a building that he had never entered before, since he was not allowed to visit such a "worldly" place. Still, that is where he drove, or his car drove, or *something* drove.

James got out of the car and walked into the bookstore, still very much in an altered state. His body zigzagged through the bookstacks, with real direction and real force, as if it somehow knew where it was going. He certainly didn't. James, in fact, felt disconnected from himself, "dissociated" most would probably say today, as if that that somehow explains anything at all.

Suddenly, he just stopped. He found himself at a section inexplicably marked "Philosophy." He had no idea what the word meant. Then it happened. A book fell off the shelf and landed at his feet. It was as if the thing jumped right then, for him no less. When the book hit the floor, James suddenly came back to himself. He reached down and picked it up. The book had a strange title: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Well, at least he could understand two of the words (they sounded biblical). He looked up. A young beautiful blonde teenager in a very short black dress was snapping his

photo and giggling at the other end of the book aisle. She ran away, never to be seen by him again.

James decided to buy the book that seemed to have sought him out and take it home, perhaps even read a little of it before he ended his miserable life. So he bought it and drove home, now in a "normal" state (if you can call the intention to kill yourself normal). James sat at home, with the book on one thigh and his dad's Colt pistol on the other. He read Nietzsche's famous prologue, where the mountain hermit Zarathustra announces the death of God and the coming of the Superman (*Übermensch*).

Was it the teaching of the Superman? Or how Nietzsche taught it, *transmitted* it to the ready reader through his uncanny words that night? In any case, this book turned out to be "the antidote to a lifetime of poison I hadn't known I was drinking," as James put it to me much later. He walked outside into a rainstorm. "I stared up at the stars between the clouds and laughed. A divine laughter, an ecstatic laughter while the rain poured down. It was the greatest moment I had ever experienced. When my sides ached and the rain abated, I walked back inside, dried off and read the rest of the book."

Perhaps it was significant that it was storming outside, and that James could see the stars between the clouds. It was also storming and lightning in the book he was reading, after all, and Nietzsche's prose is filled with dancing divine stars and nonhuman laughter. In any case, James had been changed by the book, by the author, by Zarathustra, by *something*. He put his father's gun away. Friedrich Nietzsche and his Superman had saved a young man's life a century into the author's future and an ocean and continent apart.

James would go on to engage in a full study of Nietzsche's body of work in college. He would write a dissertation on occult superhumans in the twentieth century within esoteric communities and movements that were inspired by Nietzsche's most famous book. But that is not the end of the story. Stories, after all, result in other stories, particularly when they are told to the right people at the right time. The "Evolution and Deification" symposium was such a people and such a time.

What happened after James told his story to this group of people was almost as remarkable as the story itself. Richard Baker, the American Zen teacher, was in the room as one of the invited participants. Richard Baker Roshi engaged James as a Zen teacher would. He *worked* with him, right there and then. He told James that what he had experienced that night in those special pages and in the laughter of the lightning, thunder, and rain was an early realization of the nature of mind itself. It was an early enlight-

enment experience, a *satori*, to use the Japanese word. Richard encouraged James to continue working with the awakening, to see it as a beginning and not an ending, an introduction and not a conclusion.

I have heard a *lot* of stories, many of them strange beyond strange. But James's story hit me in a particularly powerful way. I believe that this story and my subsequent interactions with James as both his teacher and his student continued to shape me, my reading, and, eventually, this book. Actually, I think this story (all of it) is how I wrote this book—or, better, how it wrote me.

INTRODUCTION

How the Book Came to Be

Ich lebe, damit ich erkenne: ich will erkennen, damit der Übermensch lebe. Wir experimentiren für ihn!

I live so that I know: I want to know so that superhumans may live. We experiment for them!

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE,
Unpublished Fragments from the Period of Thus Spoke Zarathustra

It's not me. It's the books. Students and visitors come into my faculty office at Rice University and are inevitably put in a state of quiet awe. The fluorescent lights above our heads are never on. The room is softly lit with two lamps and a bit of angled sunlight pouring in. The floor is decorated with a beautiful wool Persian rug of many colors, mostly rich blues and deep reds. The shelves are peopled with the busts, faces, and forms of various gods, goddesses, and superhumans from the history of religions and American popular culture. Most of all, the walls are lined and the floors are piled with a few thousand books. Their bright and varied spines turn the room into a kind of spiritual-intellectual cavern that welcomes and soothes.

And worries.

I always know what is coming next—the question. It is always the same question: "Have you *really* read all of these books?" My answer is always the same: "No. A library is not a sign of accomplishment. It is a sign of desire." My guest is relieved.

This book is a lot like my university office. It displays and desires. It does not accomplish. It is about a shared collective beauty, not a personal achievement. As such, this book holds in it many books and many lives, countless books and countless lives, really.

Not that I do not have my own moments of pretended grandeur. As I wrote these pages, mostly during the global pandemic, I realized that almost every section could expand into an entire book, an entire lifework. I wanted to return to my earlier training in Indian languages and the astonishing nondual philosophies of the Hindu traditions. I wanted to learn German, the language of my maternal side of the family, and become a scholar of Friedrich Nietzsche. I wanted to read all the books of W.E.B. DuBois

and immerse myself in contemporary critical race theory, particularly in its Afrofuturist genres. I wanted to relearn and develop my long forgotten high school Spanish and become an interpreter of Gloria Anzaldúa's queer life and New Age esotericism in Santa Cruz, California.

But then it hit me. I realized that the whole point of this book is not any one of those lives and works. The point of this book is *all* of those works and lives. The point of this book is the "humanities," a modern Euro-American take on what is a much more global, more diverse, and, frankly, much richer set of reading practices and intellectual-spiritual disciplines that have engaged, *and changed*, countless human beings over the millennia around the globe.[1]

Still, that is not quite right. Or that is not quite enough. This book is also an extended essay about why a strong and unapologetically *comparative* study of extreme and often culturally anomalous human experiences—historically coded as religious but increasingly separated today from these established historical associations—must be central to the transformation of the humanities; why what I would much prefer to call the history of religions (with an emphasis on history and on religions, plural) holds a very special key to the whole shebang of human knowledge and its present inadequate ordering, the sciences included.

This deeper impulse before and beyond any discipline or department is why, although I am definitely working within a particular Euro-American spiritual-intellectual lineage, I do not really want to become a scholar of this or that thinker, or, frankly, be bound by European or American thoughts. Nor do I want to claim any expertise that I in fact do not possess. Rather, I want to put the pixels of each and every author on those office bookshelves *together* to form a much bigger picture, a vision of who we really are . . . or *who we might yet become*. Most of all, I want to try to "turn around" and try to fathom the conscious light that has long been projecting all such visions, peoples, cultures, and knowledges on the endless screens of space-time. I want to *get behind* the whole damned thing.

Humble, right?

I better explain.

WHEN I GROW UP . . .

I was born in 1962 and so I remember the early children's television shows of the 1960s. This was well before *Sesame Street*, even before the American childhood ritual of Saturday morning cartoons of the 1970s. Before the rubber dinosaur creepiness of *The Land of the Lost* or the psychedelic

romp of *H.R. Pufnstuf* (did anyone just *think* about that title?), we had the more staid programs of the 1960s. A typical episode might feature a couple dozen children sitting on simple bleachers in some bare studio being entertained by adults in bad costumes with silly names, or maybe with basic puppets with even sillier names. Throw in a few *gigantic* candy bars or lollipops as gifts, which awed our little brains, and you have the basic recipe.

Then there was the standard question: "What do you want to be when you grow up?" The microphone would go around the little group to capture the always predictable answers, all, of course, culturally bound, historically determined, and heavily gendered. The boys would say things like, "I want to be a fireman," or "I want to be a policeman," or, if they were really brave, "I want to be a doctor." The girls would say things like, "I want to be a teacher," or "I want to be a nurse" (never a doctor).

I suppose I was a little less culturally bound. But not much. I never got to be on such a show, but if I had, I would have said something like, "I want to be a clown in a traveling circus" (yep), or, a little later, "I want to be a comic book artist." Actually, what I really wanted to be was an NFL quarterback, with the Dallas Cowboys no less (I had plans).

Adolescent anorexia was going to wipe that one out, if it were ever remotely possible at all. Still, I would dream for decades about playing in the big game, never quite ready, never quite suited up properly. Later, I would much identify with the adult character of Uncle Rico in *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004), pathetically filming himself throwing footballs into the landscape around his orange van, as he imagined, in utter vanity, just how great he could have been. At one point in the movie, Uncle Rico proudly shows one of his self-made videos to his two nephews, Kip and Napoleon. "This is pretty much the worst video ever made," Napoleon comments in his typical dry style.

Such are my football dreams.

What the heck is my point here? My point is that no American kid grew up then (or now) saying, "I want to be a professor of the humanities," much less, "I want to be a professor of comparative religion." That would have been one weird kid. Even pathetic Uncle Rico throwing footballs into the empty field makes more cultural sense than that.

But *why* is this? Why does no one grow up wanting to be us? And why do we think the humanities are so important? Are they? What is the point? *Is* there a point?

My fundamental answer to such questions may shock you. I hope so, anyway. I think the humanities are so important because *the humanities are*

really the superhumanities. I think there is something cosmic or superhuman smoldering in the human, something that seems ever ready to burst into flames, and sometimes does. A few fortunate souls intuit this superhuman smoldering in particularly inspired books, themselves about to burst into flames—yes, *books*, of all things—and decide to give their lives to the pursuit and nurturing of that, whatever "that" is.

Usually, of course, such souls end up pursuing the (super)human in terms that are more respectable and more culturally bound, which is to say: in ways that can get (a very few of them) paying jobs. They learn not to fess up to their original dreams. The superhuman becomes the simply human again. They go back to being doctors, which literally means "teachers" (the medical profession stole it from us until everyone forgot what it means and small children grow up wanting to be doctors but never professors). These proper humanists will talk endlessly now about anything *but* the super, unless, of course, they want to critique the super and reduce it to something else, something always bad and sad.

That's how we forget. Or are made to forget.

But, deep down, what at least some of these individuals really want, or at least what they once wanted, is to become superhumans, like the authors whom they first read and loved.

That's because they really are.

So are you.

That is the argument of this book.

Sit with that for a moment, even if, yes, I know, I know, you are not yet clear about what I mean by the superhuman. Can you imagine what the humanities might become if they were seen anew and widely understood as the *superhumanities*? What if we just called them that, put *that* on our buildings? Can you imagine what this might mean? New sources of funding might well appear. New institutional structures would certainly be called for, whole new kinds of schools, whole new ways of organizing knowledge. Entirely new cultural imaginaries, new *meanings*, new *worlds* would be revealed. And—to take us back to my opening thought experiment—little kids, of all kinds, would grow up saying, "I want to be a student, maybe even a professor of the superhumanities. I want to be a superhuman."

Who wouldn't want to be *that*?

Yes, of course, we would also have new problems and new questions (and I can well imagine the hesitations of some of my colleagues about now—our immunological responses are heavily scripted and so utterly predictable). But at least these would be truly interesting problems and

passionate questions to have. Things would not seem so goddamned bleak. Honestly, the secular scientisms, nihilistic materialisms, and unbelievable fundamentalisms of contemporary American culture are truly saddening. No wonder so many of us are on drugs. We are depressed because we are, deep down, perfectly sane. We are sad because we once saw. We are disgusted because we know better and more than this.

HOW IT GOT BIGGER

The book began boldly enough. It began as a heartfelt plea to my colleagues to establish, or reestablish, the super as a major focus of research and conversation in the study of religion, but also within the broader currents of the humanities—the study of art, history, literature, and philosophy. I have in fact been saying, teaching, whispering this for three decades now.[2] It's just me. As the book developed, however, it became something else, as books are wont to do.

It got bigger.

Part of this getting bigger was a response to national and global events that emerged almost immediately as I began to write. We suffered globally through a deadly pandemic. All of us, some more than others, thought seriously about dying. Then, particularly in the United States, we were made acutely aware of four centuries of enslavement, economic exploitation, and racial violence through the protests of the summer of 2020 following the brutal police murder of Houston native George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and, before him, too many Black men, women, and children to name. A significant reorganization of much of higher education ensued because of these two meta-events, one epidemiological, one racial. It is still going on as I finish the book in the summer of 2021.

As a white Western intellectual who had been hated and harassed for six years for his psychoanalytic thinking about sexual orientation and ecstatic religious experience in an Indian Hindu saint (SB 56–78, 133–39), and as an American who grew up largely in protest (in the only terms I had—religious ones) in the Midwest and its deep, if largely invisible, systemic racisms (SB 296–311), I was more than intellectually ready for this transformation of higher education.[3] But—and here is the deeper point—I was not *emotionally* prepared.

I did not *really* understand the historical indigenous genocides and systemic anti-Black racism that *is* American history. This, in turn, made me realize that, similarly, I never really understood the historical violences, humiliations, and internal workings of British colonialism in India that

had no doubt driven much of the emotional and political resistance to my early work (whose conclusions I have never questioned, and still do not). Nor, frankly, did I genuinely fathom how my own person, very much an individualized expression of this collective culture, had benefited from these racist and colonial histories, and continues to do so.

Not that I had not been told. I had been told, many times and in many ways. I work with African and African American colleagues and graduate students in a most remarkable department focused, among other things, on the critical study of race and religion. The work of my colleagues and their PhD students had long informed my thinking about race and religion in Africa and the United States, respectively. They taught me. They also put up with me.

Still, I did not emotionally or existentially understand the alienating question the sociologist W.E.B. DuBois had heard so many times in so many ways and was now putting on the page in order to crystallize the problem of race in America: "How does it feel to be a problem?" Like many white Americans, I could not understand the question. It was just not socially possible, given my historical privileges and comfortable place in American society. Put in moral terms, as a personalized expression of both the deep and immediate social surround, this "I" was not innocent. This "I" was guilty. I have no desire to claim otherwise. Innocence is intellectually useless, anyway. It also happens to be a farce.

It certainly helps me think and feel these thoughts that I firmly believe that I am fundamentally not this I. Or, if you prefer, I am much more than this I. You will see. That's the book again.

My first and most basic response to our present postcolonial and racial crises in the humanities and the larger culture, then, is basically the same one I learned in Roman Catholic spiritual direction and, subsequently, in psychoanalysis with respect to the depths of the soul, sexuality, and gender: not to deny what the unconscious (in this case, the social unconscious) reveals to you in dream and relationship, but to accept it, interpret it, talk about it, and, most of all, *work with it*.

I recognize that this is not exactly an answer, much less a resolution. It is more of an acknowledgment, process, and a struggle. And I see nor wish no end to it. It is rather like Sisyphus eternally pushing the boulder up the hill only to have it always roll down again, as my colleague Anthony Pinn likes to remind me, referencing the French existentialist reading of one of his favorite authors, Albert Camus.

Okay, then. We push. But we also know beforehand that we will never fully succeed, that the thing will roll back (probably over us) down the hill

again. But here is the thing: those who push in this myth also *do* get it up the hill, over and over and over again.[4]

As an associate dean in a major research university in the South, I witnessed much of this boulder pushing, soul searching, and subsequent institutional transformation of higher education up close. We were late and well behind things historically, but we were just ahead of this particular curve. Our school had founded a Center for African and African American Studies in the fall of 2019. Race in this context was both a lived reality for many of our colleagues and an intellectual project around which some of us could think and imagine anew with one another. I recognized the excitement. I had seen it before around sexuality and gender in the 1980s and 1990s. But this felt different. It was somehow more historical and more American, and not always in comfortable ways. But that was *precisely* the point. As a white intellectual, I felt both challenged and welcomed by my colleagues. I felt at home in a contentious but real family. Honestly, I felt love.

As a larger university, we had also begun to struggle with the openly racist elements of our institutional history. Black students, for example, were explicitly prohibited until 1964, and our founder, William Marsh Rice, participated in the odious institutions of slavery. As an affiliate of the new center, I asked whether it would be helpful if I could refashion my course on popular culture and the paranormal around critical race theory, sexuality studies, and trauma theory. I knew a good deal about the last two subjects, not so much about the first. The answer was yes, and so I acted. I walked down the hill and began to push on the boulder.

It didn't budge. But it made good sense that I was pushing. I had long argued, after all, that paranormal phenomena spike in the gaps, in the margins, in the fractures and traumas of both personal lives and whole societies. Moreover, I had been trained in a field of study (the history of religions) that has always relied intimately on radical human diversity—too tamely encoded as comparison—in its intellectual founders and historical materials. Indeed, the discipline of the history of religions, although definitely European in origin and expression, had practically privileged Asia, Africa, and Australia, not Christian Europe, as its main sources of historical material. And when it did focus on America, it zoomed in on colonial conquest, slavery, racism, and Black religion in one of its key founding figures, the Black historian of religions Charles Long.[5]

I worked for two years as the personal assistant for Joseph Kitagawa, one of the founding members of the history of religions school at the University of Chicago. Mr. Kitagawa, as he was called (I have no idea why we

called him that), had been dean of the Divinity School and had shaped and formed the discipline of the history of religions alongside the Romanian scholar Mircea Eliade for almost three decades when I met and worked for him in the late 1980s.[6] He was a well-known specialist on Japanese religions. He had also been ordained as an Episcopalian priest.

Mr. Kitagawa had had a stroke by the time I worked for him. One side of his face drooped a bit, and his speech was slightly slurred. He was retired. I brought him his mail twice a week. We had a ritual. I would walk over, sit down in his book-packed office in Hyde Park, mention some scholar's name whom I happened to be reading, and he would launch into some story, usually slightly salacious and always very funny. It was *great*—the oral tradition at its very best. I heard things one will never read.

One day, I brought Mr. Kitagawa a letter from President Ronald Reagan. It was a letter about a reparation check, probably from the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which gave $20,000 to each Japanese American citizen who had been interned (read: imprisoned) during World War II. Mr. Kitagawa was deeply moved by the letter. He had been imprisoned in the Minidoka War Relocation Center in Hunt, Idaho. My memory is fuzzy, but I believe he wept when he read the letter from President Reagan that day.

At the same time, this same intellectual lineage deeply appreciated European thought. I cannot also but help recall here something that Mr. Kitagawa often used to share with me. It was a heartfelt question. Why, he would often ask, did the comparative study of religion, which he genuinely *loved* (it was really quite obvious listening to him), develop in Christian Europe and not, say, in Buddhist Japan? What was it about Europe and Christian thought in the nineteenth century that made the birth of comparing religions possible at all? Kitagawa, I should emphasize, asked this question with a sense of profound appreciation. He was not advancing a critique. He was in awe. And he wanted me to share that appreciation and that awe.

My point? That the comparative study of religion meant something very specific in the 1980s, something radically critical but also wildly positive and, above all, *plural*. Just look at the situation. A small-town Catholic boy from Nebraska was working for a Japanese-born American scholar of comparative religion who was an Episcopalian priest and had been imprisoned by the US government because of his Japanese descent. I should add that this same Japanese American professor had been trained by Joachim Wach, a distinguished German sociologist of religion who had taught him at the Divinity School (and was probably gay).

In short, the history of religions, whether as a subject of study (the religions) or a community of intellectuals (the scholars who studied those

religions), was *all about* religious, racial, and cultural difference. It was also all about sexual difference, although no one could quite say that yet (and I would soon suffer for saying that). It was also all about mixing and matching. There was nothing stable here. There was a kind of pure potential and a genuine excitement, as if the world were about to change permanently and dramatically. Looking back, I think what we sensed—okay, what I sensed—was that the human is not just human; the human is also superhuman.

As Jason Josephson-Storm has observed, there was something "reflexive" about comparative religious studies: it tended to produce (or conjure) that which it was about.[7] We were not just studying superhumans, in other words. That same study also seemed to promise, implicitly but truly, *to make us so*.

TOO MUCH TRUTH

I am certain that I was working in this same superhumanist lineage decades later, when I was doing everything in my power to try to mainstream the paranormal in the academy, to bring it in, make it real, or, better, *change the real*. Perhaps it is significant that the word itself was likely a French version (1903) of an earlier English *super-* word, the *supernormal*.

Such work was not about reducing extraordinary experiences to social or historical contexts, biomedical, neurological, or evolutionary adaptive processes, or unconscious political mindsets, which is what a conventional humanism would do today. *It was about troubling reality itself*. It was about challenging, to the core, what my readers and students—most of them at Rice coming from the STEM fields—thought was real. I was not just after God, religion, and the soul. I was also after space, time, and matter. I was after them.

Here we arrive at what is perhaps the central claim of the superhumanities as I am imagining them. I originally explored this central idea around embodiment, gender, sexual orientation, sexual arousal, and mystical-erotic experiences of the real (what I eventually called "super sexualities"), but it applies as much to our present crises around the postcolonial and the question of race and diversity. That core idea goes like this: Pursue diversity until the end, make it more radical, *render it ontological*. In short, do not just decolonize history, religion, literature, or society, as academics like to say. *Decolonize reality itself*.

It is not enough, after all, to question and challenge all the ways that our colonial and slave-owning pasts have shaped our cultures and our very selves: the way we intolerantly react to one another with endless racist

assumptions about brown, black, or white skin; or build a huge wall along the US/Mexico border to keep "aliens" out; or vote for racist politicians and voter suppression; or think the Spanish Catholic names of cities in the American Southwest (San Antonio, Santa Fe, San Francisco, Los Angeles) are somehow innocent, natural, and obvious.

It is simply not enough to question and criticize these histories and then shove all these historical actors into a flat white European metaphysics of materialism, historicism, scientism, and moralism, as if these people were nothing more than biomedical bodies, historical actors, and social animals. What of their *souls*? Of their supernatural experiences? Of their encounters with God? Of their miraculous saints? Of their psychoactive mushrooms and plant medicines? Of the nonhuman agents and spectral entities, the demonic angels, with whom they routinely interact in terror, healing, and transformation?

To speak to my academic colleagues for a moment, we cannot go on and on about decolonizing this or that and then turn everyone into good Marxists, postcolonial materialists, or ironic postmoderns. That is not just morally wrong; it simply turns everyone else into some pale reflection of the Western academy.

This is what I meant in the prologue about teaching my students to take the rogue or fantastic aspects of religious experience not just critically or historically (that's the white European metaphysics again) but also experientially or empirically—that is, as telling us something potentially true not only about ourselves *but about the actual structures of space, time, and matter itself*. Maybe the Virgin really did appear to the Mexican peasant. Maybe the miraculous healing of advanced cancer really did take place. Certainly, the Italian Franciscan friar really floated and flew.[8] Taking very seriously other people's worlds, in other words, is not just good historical description; it is also ontological shock.[9]

I first found an adequate expression of this particular understanding of human diversity in the work of the anthropologist and cultural psychologist Richard A. Shweder in the early 1990s. Shweder was writing then about what he called the "reality-posits" of other cultures. He was asking readers to take such realities seriously, indeed, potentially as their own.[10] In this way, we can see the expressions and institutionalization of religious diversity not as a zero-sum game on a chessboard, with this or that identity converting or dominating the other (they win, we lose; we win, they lose) but as the privileged path to more and more insight, more and more value, truth, and being—in short, *more of the real*. We can look down on the chessboard from above and see that the particular game we are playing

is just a game, and that there are other games we can play. We can also cease to identify with the games altogether (SB 308–11).

It must have been a conference in the early or mid-1990s. I was still in graduate school or barely out. I don't remember. I was having dinner with a group of people that included Professor Shweder, who had recently published *Thinking through Cultures*. He might as well have titled the collection *Thinking through Realities*, since what he actually argues in the book is that there are different "reality-posits" expressed or experienced by different states of mind, and that the anthropologist or historian of religions is a kind of intellectual shaman called to travel through these other worlds and, by virtue of this constant traveling back and forth, provide new comparative insights for his or her own community.

Dinner was over, and I had to ask him, "Do you *really* believe this? I mean, do you really think that, say, the Buddhists of ancient India or medieval China, or Hindu Shaivas in Assam today had or have access to realities that we in modern-day Chicago do not?" Shweder did not hesitate, and he was smiling, as if pleased with my question. "Yes, I do."

I recall perfectly my shocked emotional response: *happiness*. I was so happy because this is not what one generally expected (or expects) from a Western academic. The answer also jived especially well with my developing sense of things, although I would continue to struggle (and still struggle) with the moral pluralism that the same multiple vision implies or demands of us. If, after all, we let go of the (false) notion that reality is what we think it is, why should we then hang on to the notion that morality is what we think it should be?

Why do we see people calmly describing themselves as witches around the world in culture after culture well outside any forced confession or righteous projection? Rick's answer: because there are witches.[11] Here, anthropology, the comparative study of religion, or profound historiography are about the stunning realization that the real is plastic or malleable, that we, as individuals and communities, actualize what is potential in that real, and that *different peoples actualize different truths and values, even different realities, to know and experience as "true."* Truth is relative, then, not because there is no truth *but because there is too much truth*.

THE CLASS AND THE POSTER

Perhaps this is why when I sat down to refigure my "Mutants and Mystics" course along critical racial lines in the fall of 2019, it felt so familiar. Once again, I wanted to queer my own disciplines, make them weird again,

decolonize their reality-posits. I worked with one of my most astute public readers, the IT professional, artist, and paranormal researcher David Metcalfe, who created the poster for the course.

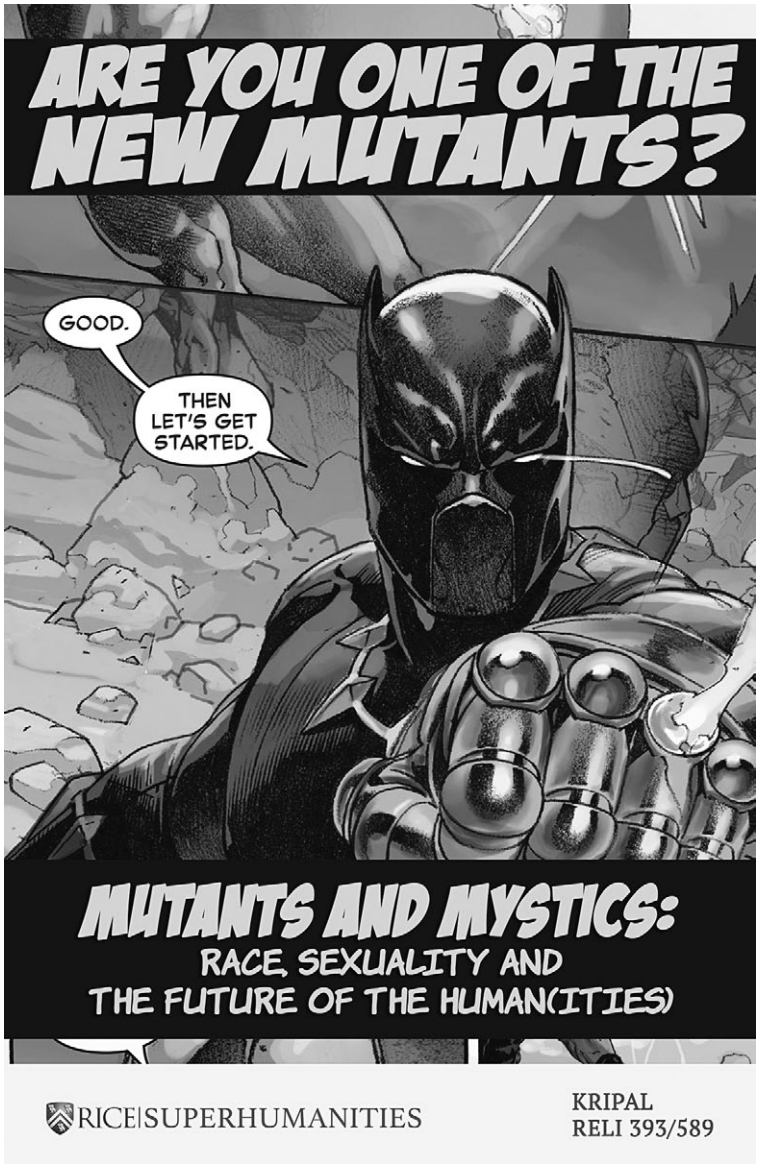
The poster quietly carried the banner of the "Rice Superhumanities." I had earlier invented the phrase for my website and recalled it here as faithful to the course. I believe this poster, digitally transmitted on November 5, 2019, for the 2020 spring semester course at Rice University, was the first graphic appearance of the term *superhumanities* in the sense I am intending it here. If the fundamental idea for this book has a birthday, this poster is it (see figure 1).

David created the poster in a way that encodes my earlier published work on science fiction and the paranormal (*Mutants and Mystics*), my long correspondence and friendships with paranormally gifted people ("Are you one of the new mutants?"), and an iconic Black superhuman (Black Panther). He got it just right.

In fact, David got it more right than either of us knew at the time, since the birth of the Black Panther image itself is just a bit eerie and is a perfect exemplum of what I was up to in the course. One of the books I assigned, Adilifu Nama's *Super Black*, tells the story of how the superhero character was created by Jack Kirby and Stan Lee (two white Jewish men) in Marvel's *Fantastic Four* series in July 1966, three months *before* the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense incorporated the black panther emblem as its namesake and in the same year as the Lowndes Country Freedom Organization used an image of the black panther to signal Black political independence. It was the same year that Stokely Carmichael sent what Nama calls a "sociocultural shockwave" through the land with his super-invocation of "Black Power." Nama draws the conclusions: "If ever there was a textbook example of Carl Gustav Jung's notion of synchronicity, whereby coincidental events speak to broader underlying dynamics, the arrival of the Black Panther is it."[12]

The opening question of the course poster—"Are you one of the new mutants?"—is also central and was meant quite seriously. It is no accident, for example, that the present book begins with the anomalous experiences of one of my mutant graduate students, is visited throughout by other mutant intellectuals and writers, and ends with the factual fiction of an astute mutant reader of my work. It is part of the point of the whole book: we are *all* mutants, if mostly unconscious or unrealized ones.

Nowhere has this been so apparent to me as in the letters, emails, and text messages that I receive on a weekly basis. I continue to hear, as I have for two decades now, from readers and colleagues around the globe who



have been awakened or traumatized into their own rogue abilities, almost always to their great confusion and even personal shame and suffering—male, female, queer, transgendered, old, young, white, Black, Native American, Latinx, Latin American, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, secular, and scientist. Honestly, *it doesn't seem to matter*.

One such mutant intellectual prodigy, for example, reported an inexplicable illness and a kind of spiritual "invasion" that struck him at age nineteen: "Consciousness as I had known it was completely demolished, and the life I had known was swept from its foundations." One eventual result was an eidetic memory and the ability to read and understand some sixty languages (with study): "What had previously been difficult or impossible for me suddenly became easy, as if I'd undergone a 'mind transplant' or something." His technical research now took on a life of its own: "It was as if the manuscripts were looking for me and not the other way around." He experienced a profound sense of déjà vu when he visited specific foreign research sites. He also describes how he used to speak ancient languages as a kind of "channeling," even taking on different personalities and voices as he spoke them, as a friend observed.[13]

Technical scholarship is one result, then. But there are others. Some correspondents run their own private businesses that employ or study these same anomalous capacities (think clairvoyance, precognition, and clairaudience) to consult with major corporations, federal agencies, intelligence professionals, government research scientists, civil authorities, military contractors, and private citizens.

These super-readers, as I call them, have long been pushing me to teach or, better, to provide some sort of adequate historical and philosophical context for just these types of experiences (their own). They have been asking me to create some kind of institutional and conceptual framework for human abilities that are not supposed to exist but clearly do. It is not that these individuals want me to teach them how to see across space and time or receive imaginally coded information from the future. I cannot do that, and I tell them that, all the time. Rather, they are asking me for moral solidarity and some practical path forward in their search for an authoritative cultural space so such capacities can be effectively queried, developed, and sustained. In my own language, they want their experiences to be taken seriously, but also to be theorized and stabilized for a future culture (certainly not the present one). Basically, *they want a new kind of school*.

It was through all these historical events—at once epidemiological, racial, higher educational, pop cultural, and esoteric—that the book gradually became something other than what it had been when it began. It got bigger, *way* bigger. It ceased to be a series of studies of this or that life and work and became instead a conceptual framework or intellectual charter for just such a new kind of school, a School of the Superhumanities (put that on the building) that does not exist and that is, in fact, impossible

within the epistemological frameworks and ontological assumptions of the contemporary academy.

So change them.

POSTHUMAN, TRANSHUMAN, SUPERHUMAN

The superhumanities do not exist in any official or institutional capacity. My Rice colleague, the critical cultural theorist Cary Wolfe, edits a distinguished book series called Posthumanities. *Those* exist and have existed at least since the 1990s, or earlier still, in the foundational work of thinkers as distinct as Gregory Bateson, Michel Foucault, Donna Haraway, and Bruno Latour and their various challenges to human exceptionalism.[14] As Foucault famously had it in *The Order of Knowledge*, "man" itself is "an invention of recent date" and is "perhaps nearing its end," destined to be erased "like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea."[15] Moreover, contemporary writers in and outside the academy speak endlessly of the transhuman, particularly around the fusion of carbon-based life-forms and silicone-based technologies within various artificial intelligence visions.

But this is different. I am not writing of the posthuman or the transhuman. I am writing of the superhuman, *which is a conscious and intended extension of humanism*, perhaps even an experience-based human exceptionalism (since a great deal of experiential and evolutionary evidence points to the real likelihood that the human state is, in fact, exceptional). Although such a proposal does not represent the views of most humanists or of my colleagues at my own university, or any other present institution of higher learning for that matter, and should *not* be construed as such, it is anything but a new development.

Admittedly, few speak or even think today of a developed worldview we might call superhumanism, much less a set of professional disciplines called the superhumanities. Except that they *have* been speaking and writing about the superhuman, and for the last two centuries no less, certainly in the three European languages that I know something about—English (*superhuman*), French (*surhumain*), and German (*übermenschlich*)—and no doubt in the other European languages as well. Indeed, I suspect strongly that many readers will be more than a little surprised to learn just how common and central to the humanities the various cognates of the super really are, particularly a word like *superconsciousness*, which we will meet repeatedly below. Indeed, you may well grow weary of all of these *super*-words.

But that is exactly my point. Why *are* these words so prominent in so many central authors and texts? And why have we not noticed them before, made them central to our understanding and practice of the humanities? It is as if we are intentionally looking away.

I think we are.

Once we turn back around, once we *pay attention*, we can easily see that the superhuman has been an especially common motif in world civilizations for at least five full millennia. If we simply broaden our scope and scale and move into African, ancient Egyptian, Greek, Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu cultures, as I will indeed gesture toward in chapter 1, we can easily see that the conviction and the endless experiences behind the conviction are quite common and fantastically developed.[16]

I will return to this point in the first chapter: we arrived at the superhuman *way* before we arrived at the human. The basic idea of the superhuman, far from being some recent American pop-cultural invention or coded expression of some sinister social Darwinism, is actually universal and ancient. It is a part, a *big* part, of who and what the human species has tried to become over the millennia around the world. And it is anything *but* a white preserve. If we are going to take human diversity truly seriously, we better take the superhuman very seriously.

THAT OTHER SUPERMAN

The idea of the superhuman found its most potent, problematic, and promising form in a single German word from the 1880s. Enter the enigmatic future human or *Übermensch*, traditionally, from 1905 on, the "Superman" in American English, but more recently and more accurately rendered as the "superhumans."[17] Such a collective being or super-species was seen and prophesized by the ecstatic German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in his final years, but particularly in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1884), where the teaching was most famously expressed in the book's opening parable.

The latter book, which we have already met in the story of James, was ignored in the author's time and, by his own assessment, profoundly misheard or, rather, not heard at all. Still, it would eventually become one of the best-selling and most read philosophical works *of all time*.[18] Let that sink in. This publishing tidbit is no tangential factoid. It is an uncanny sign of our modern world and particularly of that branch of higher education known, but not really known, as the humanities, where the text is commonly read and widely revered (and just as commonly dismissed or condemned) to this day.

It is also more than relevant for my own present intentions that, as Tyler T. Roberts has put it, Nietzsche is "perhaps the greatest modern critic of religion."[19] Indeed, when the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur invoked the three greatest "masters of suspicion" of the modern world with respect to religion, Nietzsche was among the trio, along with Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud.[20] Interestingly, all three thought and wrote in German, and two of them were Jewish intellectuals. Still in this same lineage but now in another European language, Nietzsche's acute reader and undisputed successor of theorizing knowledge-power (*le savoir-pouvoir*), the French philosopher Michel Foucault, is easily the most cited and discussed author in the humanities today. No one comes close.

To engage Nietzsche seriously, then, is no minor thing. It is to plumb the modern humanities at one of its best-known but also most mysterious and morally difficult tributaries. It is also to revisit one of the most important origin points of modernity and postmodernity to see how both have seldom really engaged their own strange, experiential, even eerie beginnings in the person and books of Friedrich Nietzsche. If we were to engage more fully those Nietzschean origins, we would see that this modernity and postmodernity are really so many early misses of a still emerging, still potential supermodernity.

Indeed, although the utility of Foucault's thought for feminist and queer theory and historiography more generally is beyond doubt, and although the influence of French thought (mostly Foucault and Jacques Derrida) on departments of literature, philosophy, and religion in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s is well established, Foucault's specific notions of power, discourse, and subjectivity are rather distant echoes of the sheer ontological shock of Nietzsche's veridical encounter with the circular nature of time and his related biological or evolutionary vision of the coming superhumans. With all due respect, the simple truth is that Foucault is not Nietzsche's equal here, and to the extent we have become Foucaldians (rejecting any and all metanarratives or positive futurisms and focusing instead entirely on discourse, historical constructions, power relations, and ethics), we have misunderstood, or simply denied, our own superhumanist origins in Nietzsche.[21]

Through our long recent travels through Foucault and deconstruction, moreover, we have not sufficiently recognized that there were deep streams of antifoundationalist or deconstructive thought in America well before the 1970s, when Foucault and Derrida came on the scene. Indeed, Americans had been reading and receiving Nietzsche *for seven decades already*, as Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen has shown in exquisite detail in her *American*

Nietzsche. Even more telling, Nietzsche himself was deeply inspired by an even earlier American author, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82), whose coded description of losing his ego, becoming a "transparent eye-ball" and "part or a particle of God," and subsequently spending the rest of his life speaking and writing of a new "religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs" shows every sign of expressing the superhumanities that I am advancing here in a very different moment.[22]

It is just not true, then, that the "French Nietzsche" is the only American Nietzsche, or, frankly, the most important one. It is also not true that the influences and transmissions flow in a straight line from Europe to the United States. It is much more of a circle: from an American Emerson to a European Nietzsche and back to an American Nietzsche again. He is ours, and we are his.

Basically, however, Foucault *has* presently eclipsed this American Nietzsche in the humanist academy, like the moon moving in front of the sun at midday. I want to honor that moon. I also want to acknowledge that the late lunar Foucault was moving more and more to the altered states of knowledge, unrepresentable somatic energy, and mystical power that so fascinated Nietzsche, what the aging Foucault, approaching his own death, called "technologies of the self."

Still, Michel Foucault is not Friedrich Nietzsche. Not even close. Accordingly, I want to let that Foucauldian glowing moon, at least as it has been read and understood by most present-day postmodern thinkers, pass by so that I can look right into the Nietzschean sun exploding in outer space behind it.

And, yes, I know that is potentially blinding.

Squinting and not always seeing, I have tried my best to acknowledge the solar Nietzsche in what follows, and I will turn to him much more fully in a future work. Such an acknowledgment or such future work, of course, does not result in agreement. I am deeply indebted to Nietzsche (we *all* are in the humanities), but I am finally no Nietzschean (a contradiction in terms anyway, since to follow Nietzsche is precisely *not* to follow him). Nietzsche's open misogyny and clear mocking of the modern movement for equal gender rights are bad enough, but this is before we get to his defense and praise of slavery as "a condition of every high culture" or his obvious and dramatic rejection of democracy.[23] Such lines and convictions are clearly at complete odds with our modern convictions, certainly with my own convictions, and we should just say that.

To make matters worse (much worse), Nietzsche's sister and caretaker, Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche, married, to her brother's vocal condemna-

tion, a well-known anti-Semite and future Nazi propagandist and then later disastrously promoted a grotesque distortion of Nietzsche's thought to the Nazi regime and its murderous anti-Semitism and German nationalism (both of which her brother would have abhorred). German soldiers carried *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* with them into battle, and Hitler himself was even photographed in the Nietzsche archives with a bust of the philosopher and gifted the latter's collected works to Mussolini. Not exactly helpful.

Because of these historical facts, and they are facts, any and all visions of the superhuman have been too easily tarred with the same simplistic brush. Superhuman = fascism = Nazis. End of story.

This needs to be called out for what it clearly is: a most dangerous simplification, if not patent nonsense. It is also historically shortsighted. Or just blind. What should we do, for example, with the other historical fact that the German intellectuals who did the most to forward and establish Nietzsche in American postwar thought were political exiles *from* Nazi Germany, and that many of them were Jewish intellectuals? As was, by the way, the single most influential American interpreter of Nietzsche by far: Walter Kaufmann.

We also have to recognize that American political philosophers and feminist and Black thinkers and activists have been reading Nietzsche for well over a century in laser-like diagnostic ways, not naive proscriptive ways, and that they have consistently found in the philosopher one of their most acute predecessors and inspirations.[24] Perhaps no figures are more relevant in our present introductory context, paranormal poster and all, than Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, who "drafted their Black Panther Party platform and program in 1966, and with it a new vision of how Nietzsche could become a source of power for black self-determination and liberation."[25]

Newton was especially Nietzschean and eloquent. In his autobiography, *Revolutionary Suicide*, Newton explains that Nietzsche was a shaping influence on the Black Panther philosophy. He did not always agree with Nietzsche (again, who does?), but the seer was a key source and inspiration for what would become Black power. "The more he attributes to God, the more inferior he becomes," Newton would write, echoing almost perfectly Ludwig Feuerbach, a key German predecessor of Nietzsche.[26] And once God was dead, the human could be deified. Indeed, the key Black Panther rallying cry "All Power to the People" was a "metaphysical" claim about "man as God."[27] It was also fundamentally Nietzschean.

As were the ways that the Black power movement took back and

resignified words like *Black* to mean, not more white terrorism, but beauty, power, and more meaning. This was Nietzschean self-fashioning and self-creation in the heart of the American counterculture and civil rights movement. Ratner-Rosenhagen quotes Newton and explains the social ethics that flowed out of the Black Panther deification of the human: "Newton's Nietzsche argued that man should strive to make man his God, rather than prostrate himself to a fictive one. . . . For Newton that meant striving for the God in one another. 'If you believe that man is the ultimate being, then you will act according to your belief,' argued Newton. . . . His reformulation of Nietzsche, then, stressed the *social responsibility* that comes with endowing one's self and one's fellowmen with reverence and awe."[28] This was a true "will to power" (*Wille zur Macht*)—in this case, a will to Black power.

Along similar self-fashioning lines, we also have to recognize that this decisive owning of one's own values, "creating" them anew, "willing" them away from the past and the present, particularly in relationship to a conviction in the superhuman as I will do here, is *precisely* what Nietzsche called us to do. This self-creation, too, is Nietzschean. If I disagree with Nietzsche, then, I disagree with him *with him*.

To imagine such an American Nietzsche responsibly, however, we better get the historical Nietzsche right first, or at least right enough. We should acknowledge, for example, that Nietzsche was perfectly aware of his own "reversal of all values" and that he himself was deeply critical and suspicious of all such moralisms and their righteous convictions, which—let us not flinch—include our own. He was not out to reject, say, a submissive "slave morality" in order to simply replace it with its opposite, a strong hierarchical "master morality." He was out to relativize, historicize, and profoundly question *all* moralities, to move beyond them entirely.

We should be aware, in other words, that most of the philosophical and moral reasons given for rejecting Nietzsche were *precisely* what he rejected about conventional philosophy and morality—these rejections, then, only prove his point. He was not doing conventional philosophy. He was philosophizing about philosophy, moving beyond or entirely outside its conventional boundaries and moralities.[29] Bluntly, he was writing and thinking "above" (*über*) us, in the super.

In one of the more humorous but instructive images of his unpublished notebooks that I will return to many times in the following pages, Nietzsche would write that he is strolling around above our heads on the next floor up. We cannot stand this (we cannot even speak of "up"—that is, of a higher knowledge—in the humanities today), so we put "wood and earth and refuse" between him and us, so as to muffle the "speech of

his steps."[30] As for the roof over *his* head, it "begins in that place where all stairways end," entirely beyond thought and "experience" itself—the open sky.[31]

AGAINST SPIRITUAL AND MORAL BYPASSING

I fully understand that, with an exotic term such as *superhumanities*, I am very much writing against the established conventions of the humanities (and the sciences). But I very much *want* to be exotic, and for a simple reason: because I think the human *is* exotic. I think the human is in fact cosmic, and that there is no way to overestimate just how exotic and cosmic we really and truly are—each and every one of us, no exceptions.

Having said that, I am keenly aware that some of my closest colleagues will disagree with me, profoundly. Moreover, I also fully understand that that "each and every one of us"—that is, my insistence on sameness as well as difference (never in place of difference)—can be read as yet another attempted (white) takeover or ideological subsumption, a too-quick and too-easy affirmation of "unity" before we confront the daily painful details of gender and sexual injustice, colonial legacy, and systemic anti-Black racism—a kind of "spiritual bypassing," as is commonly noted.[32]

I take those objections very seriously. Indeed, I accept them. I spent two decades working for gender and sexual justice and becoming an international target of hatred, bigotry, and grotesque misinformation campaigns for my work, which includes very strong moral critiques. These are the "moral objections" of my subtitle. Such moral objections are not performative or instances of virtue signaling on my part, taken up for the sake of some political correctness of the day. I have held different versions of these moral objections at least since the late 1980s. I have lived them. I have also suffered for them.

Sharing such moral objections, however, does not mean that I think they are absolute, or that they must block every other way forward. As important as such moral criticisms are, I seriously doubt that they can address, much less answer, the full range of human longings, which are often as religious and transcendent as they are secular and immanent. If the history of religions means anything, we were not put together for either the moral or the transcendent. We were put together for both.

A simple thought experiment can demonstrate this. Imagine a secular social world in which all our class, gender, sexual, racial, and ecological concerns were acknowledged and adequately met. Imagine, in effect, a moral utopia. Would any of this resolve the ancient and universal religious

questions of the human condition? Would we then be able to answer the ultimate questions that the Gnostic Christian asked some eighteen centuries ago: Who are we, *really*? Where did we come from? What is this world we find ourselves in? How did we end up here, and why? And where will we go after we die?

I am a Western white heterosexual man. I have enjoyed, and still enjoy, most all of the privileges that these particular identity formations have made possible in this particular historical moment. But I can assure you that none of these privileges even *begins* to answer these ultimate questions, which are simply of another order and address dimensions of our existence that have very little, if anything at all, to do with the social, the political, the economic, or the moral. It is not that such moral matters are unimportant; it is that they are simply inadequate. It is that they are beginnings, not endings. They are absolutely necessary, and absolutely insufficient.

Accordingly, I honestly do not see how moral criticism or social critique, of whatever sort, can answer what are essentially ontological questions. As important as all our present social justice questions really are, none of them reach beyond their own social and natural worlds. More to my present concern in this particular book, *many of the present ways that we address these moral dimensions effectively suppress or deny any adequate addressing of the ontological dimensions*.

I am not suggesting any sinister motivations here, although I have occasionally seen some very disturbing instances of the moral intentionally and aggressively suppressing the super. Generally speaking, though, I think the suppression is largely a matter of cultural, institutional, and personal bandwidth, and of the existential or pragmatic fact that focusing on one aspect of human potential usually means not activating most of the others. I understand that, and I accept it. But is not that again why human diversity is so important? If we are really so different, then why can we not do different things?

I continue to believe that we can actualize human potential in richer, more complex, more effective, and *other* ways. I think it is time to look into the future and foretell the approaching horizon of what I am calling the superhumanities, which would deepen and celebrate the prophetic moral functions of the humanities but not deny the transcendent dimensions one more time for the sake of some perfectly just reservation or accurate criticism. If, after all, there is always the possibility of a *spiritual bypassing*—that is, an avoidance of serious psychological, social, and moral issues for the sake of ultimate religious goals—then there is also such a thing as

moral bypassing—an avoidance of ultimate things for the sake of more immediate psychological, social, and moral concerns. One bypass is not corrected by another.

SOCIOSPIRITUAL EXPERIMENTS

I confess that our present moral bypassing (which is to say, our erasure of the transcendent) strikes me as very Protestant, as liberal Protestant, to be precise. I am reminded of my youthful pious disappointment at walking into Protestant churches in my Midwestern hometown. They seemed so, well, so *empty*. Just blank walls, pews, and maybe an abstract cross at the front (with no deified human being on it). No statues of saintly and slightly crazy superhumans either. Nothing supernatural *at all*. It was all upstanding morality. Christian life was not about human deification or becoming bilocating, floating, or healing saints. It was about how to be a good upstanding citizen, how not to disturb the middle-class life of rural America. To cite the wickedly funny words of one of my university colleagues, this kind of liberal Protestantism had become little more than "the ACLU with hymns."

There is another way to invoke Roman Catholicism here, and not just as a kind of aesthetic horror before Protestant (or academic) spiritual emptiness. The Roman Catholic tradition, after all, argued *for centuries* about whether the *vita contemplativa* (the "contemplative life" concerned primarily with ultimate ontological things, with union with God) was superior to the *vita activa* (the "active life" concerned primarily with social and moral concerns, with charity), or whether some balance should be struck between the two. Was it the knowledge of God and ultimate things, or the love of God and neighbor that should be primary?

No permanent or universal solution was ever reached. But—and here is the thing—in the process of trying, new spiritualities and specialized religious orders were formed, one after the other, that took up different emphases and different balances and pursued them to significant social and spiritual effects: the Trappists, the Franciscans, the Dominicans, the Jesuits, and so on. The European universities were also first created through these very religious orders and their contentious specializations and theological, moral, and philosophical differences.

So, too, here with the humanities and the superhumanities, I expect no resolution, no permanent answer. But I do expect new institutions or future formations of higher learning and higher knowledge: new intellectual-spiritual "Franciscans" and "Dominicans," to speak in medi-

eval terms. I expect different visions and different practices of the future human. I expect different superhumanities.

To speak in more Nietzschean terms, what I really expect is that we can someday see that *all* our moralities, *all* "our assertions of self are merely the rattling of our cages" — cages, moreover, whose bars have been shaped, strengthened, and then gilded by long history, noble tradition, holy religion, and now the righteous academy.[33] Do we really have to keep rattling those intellectual bars? Can we not simply *walk through them* as if they were not really there? They are, after all, not really there. Precisely because we made up that iron cage (this is the gift-insight of the postmodern humanities), we can now unmake it and construct or envision something more positive, even cosmic (this is the gift-insight of the superhumanities).

In the meantime (and that could be a very long time), I want to acknowledge my status as an outlier, not romanticize it or use it as a specious rhetoric of authority, as if thinking in the margins somehow automatically makes one right. I also want to make it as clear as possible that these essays, even and especially in their ontological dimensions, are *experiments*, certainly not certainties. I want us to make a claim on the real, not because I think we know what the real is but because I think our present problems are mostly functions of inadequate ontologies and a subsequent refusal to imagine new realities. I have become more and more convinced that, if we are going to move beyond those present problems, then we are going to have to operate out of radically new ontologies. This is the only way the humanities can ultimately matter. We have to imagine ourselves anew. *Wir experimentiren für ihn*, "We experiment for them."

It is perfectly possible, of course, that the social critics of any and all visions of the superhuman are correct. The question remains, though: correct about *what*? And correct *on what floor*? Nietzsche, and a million other voices and bodies from a thousand other cultures, continue to speak their own truths upstairs, "above" our heads. And these truths are simply not assimilable into our own forms of knowledge "down" here, however enlightened or morally aware we think we are in this historical moment.

NOT SO SUPER

I should finally add that I am not claiming any special status for myself. Nietzsche strolls above my head, too. Much less do I live in the sky. But I am claiming that the history of religions sparks and spikes with exactly these kinds of "impossible" superhuman states (including life in the sky); that, indeed, those global and local histories make no sense at all with-

out such altered states of knowledge and power. I am also claiming that many of the canonical figures of the humanities had (or were) these altered states as well.

Finally, I am also claiming that, to the extent that we do not have or, perhaps more practically, cannot imagine such impossible experiences, we cannot and will not understand the founding figures of the humanities or what they have gifted us in their altered texts. We will underestimate, vastly, the humanities, because we will not see that they are also the superhumanities. *That's* my point. *That's* what the book is about.

Finally, before we definitively begin, let me say this. As an aging academic who usually does not feel very super (there's an understatement), I am quite certain that I am wrong about any number of things. I don't care. We don't have time for being right about everything. The important thing is to get the ideas out there. My colleagues, students, and readers can then agree or disagree with these ideas, reject them, correct them, nuance them, or develop them further—in essence, overcome me. So be it. They are the future superhumans to whom I look forward, for whom I experiment, and for whom I want to know.

1 LEGITIMATE SCIENCE FICTION

From the History of Religions to the Superhumanities

> Religion is a complex of practices that are based on the premise of the existence of superhuman powers, whether personal or impersonal, that are generally invisible.
>
> MARTIN RIESEBRODT, *The Promise of Salvation*

> Therefore, we must dare say that the human on earth is a mortal god but that God in heaven is an immortal human. Through these two then, cosmos and human, all things exist, but they all exist by action of the One.
>
> *Corpus Hermeticum*

The historical truth is that we got to the superhuman before we got to the human. Way before. Endless religious conceptions of the supernatural predate any scientific or secular notion of the natural. The concepts of nature and supernature are in historical fact not stable and are in constant flux. Consequently, there were many, probably innumerable, superhumanisms before there was anything remotely like modern humanism. The trick now, or so it seems to me, is to figure out how to recognize and relate these ancient (and modern) experiences of the superhuman to contemporary secular and moral conceptions of the human. More flux.

I have told the story of how we got to the human, or humanism, elsewhere.[1] It is not my intention to revisit those histories here. It is my intention to begin with a too brief discussion of where we have already been with the history of religions so that we can get a better sense of where we might want to go.

Allow me to begin by observing that I have read or heard about innumerable encounters with God or ultimate reality as well as endless stories about gods and saints, angels and demons, monsters and cryptids, invisible beings, conscious lightforms, and journeys—in or outside the body—to worlds upon worlds of every sort, "heavens and hells," as our ancestors used to say. But all these encounters and stories have one rather obvious feature in common: they were all, *every last one of them*, known in and as a human person. Is that really so hard to see? That our humanity is

the medium, and maybe the very source, of all spectral presences, superpowers, and transcendent realms? This is one major reason that the comparative study of religion should lie at the center of any remotely adequate expression of the superhumanities—that is, any intellectual search for the fuller and fuller nature of the human.

Nor is this supernature simply a matter of the historical objects of such a study. It is also about the modern subjects who undertake such study. Many of the most distinguished practitioners of the comparative study of religion have thought and written out of altered states of mind and body that could well be described as superhuman. Think Mircea Eliade's stepping "out of time" and "out of space" while practicing yoga and Tantra in India in the late 1920s and laying the foundation for his still classic study of yoga as the search for absolute spiritual freedom (SB 111). Or Louis Massignon's conviction that an eleventh-century Islamic saint actually intervened in his own desperate life and saved him from suicide through a parapsychological distortion of Einsteinian space-time (SB 105–9). Or Huston Smith's Neoplatonic revelations on LSD in the early 1960s and his clear sighting of five flying saucers, with his dean—and in the latter's office, no less (SB 137–38). As we shall see soon enough, this is also the case in the humanities more generally, but it is *obviously and patently so* in the comparative study of religion.

Despite, then, our present secular assumptions and our own perfectly justified suspicions with respect to religious institutions, it is unquestionably here, in the history of religions, that the superhuman was first born and where it was articulated most elaborately in text, ritual, art, music, architecture, practice, community, institution, sorcery, magic, and miracle. As we know them today at least, the humanities were eventually born in Europe among the religious elite and amid explicitly theological concerns and projects, *but the religions came first*. We were cosmic, it turns out, before we were human. *Way* before.

Religion is how we got to super.

It is that simple.

And that complicated.

RELIGION AS LEGITIMATE SCIENCE FICTION

Martin Riesebrodt was a German sociologist of religion who once taught at the University of Chicago Divinity School. I remember him arriving in the early 1990s, when I was leaving and he was working on the sociology of fundamentalism. But I never studied with him. I was delighted, then, to

discover his late work, *The Promise of Salvation* (2009), which resonates on a social scientific scale with the more eccentric ways that I have attempted to reimagine the comparative study of religion.

A significant feature of that resonance is the fact that Riesebrodt unapologetically affirms the consistency of religious forms and practices across clime and time while also paying close attention to their important local differences and cultural specifics. He will surrender neither sameness nor difference, even as he wishes to place the accent back on what is shared and common and not on what is only local, relative, and specific. Indeed, he argues that what he calls "religion's promise" (more on that in a moment) is "astonishingly constant" across temporal and cultural boundaries and that the current sole focus on deconstruction in the humanities has hindered "serious research and has confused a whole generation of students."[2] That is my generation he is writing about, and a few since.

Most relevant for our present concerns is Riesebrodt's constant focus on the mythical-physical manifestations of "charisma," or strangely gifted individuals who manifest exotic psychophysical phenomena and, by doing so, end up effecting, through a thousand channels, the mutation of public social institutions (and people). Although his focus on charisma is clearly Weberian (more on that in a moment), Riesebrodt's core thesis on the centrality and crucial importance of "superhuman powers" (*übermenschliche Mächten*) is a Nietzschean echo in English and an obvious invocation of the seer in the sociologist's original German.[3]

Charisma is a Greek term commonly used in the New Testament that means "gift" or "grace" and whose cognate, *charismata*, could refer to the various prophetic or extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit in the early Christian communities, particularly in the Pauline letters (the earliest Christian communities, in other words, began with anomalous phenomena, often connected to trance). The German social theorist Max Weber (1864–1920) did more than anyone to define charisma sociologically and bring the category into common use in the social sciences and humanities. The concept was all about naming that very special something of a selected or gifted person "endowed with supernatural, superhuman [*übermenschlichen*], or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These as such are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as divine in origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader."[4] Put simply, for Weber, both religious and political power are historically based on superhuman powers of rare but real individuals.

So, too, for Riesebrodt, as for Weber (and for Nietzsche before them both), these superhuman powers—as ideals or actualities, or both—are at the originating source of what we now call religion. Such superhuman powers are acquired (or, better, as Riesebrodt's language suggests, *activated*) by charismatic individuals, usually through extreme ascetic practices—such as excessive fasting, extreme self-isolation, disciplined bodily posture, extraordinary meditational concentration, or the fierce sublimation of sexual forces.

There is seldom anything balanced or normal about such ascetic practices. The point, after all, is precisely *not* to be balanced and healthy—that is, *not* to fit into one's social surround. The point is to transform, utterly and completely, the functioning of the body-mind. The point is to deconstruct the biological *and* social surround, intervene into both, transform them, and so become something else. The point is physical and social *mutation*, a most potent and provocative modern word that is also used in the sociological literature.

And sometimes, just sometimes, it works. Once such superhuman powers are activated and observed or experienced by others (they tend to be contagious), remembered stories about these same superhuman powers become the basis of later ritual and institutional complexes around the transformed, enlightened, or saved individual that invoke and activate these powers in others toward various personal and social ends. Such holy figures, ritual practices, and subsequent institutions eventually become religious for Riesebrodt to the extent that they enable human beings to make contact with a source of superhuman power. In short, whether imagined or real (or, more likely, both), it is *precisely* this public claim and personal experience of transcendence, of something superhuman, that makes religion religious.

Yep.

Riesebrodt explores different definitions or understandings of such contact, but one he describes as "activating superhuman potential that slumbers within a person."[5] For someone like me, who has spent decades writing about human potential and now the superhuman, such language is about as close as it gets to one's thought in the available social scientific literature.

Until it gets closer still. Riesebrodt will describe his own universal concept of religion as a "legitimate form of science fiction." This definition understands religion as actual social relations and actual "practices that are based on a belief in superhuman powers that can provide blessings or ward off misfortune."[6] In short, people legitimate and make real these beliefs

by acting on these superhuman powers and practicing them within social institutions that we can now call religions, whose basic convictions and claimed phenomena look remarkably like what we now call in our more secular mode science fiction.

Such an invocation of science fiction may have been a one-off for the German sociologist, but it certainly hooked me. It hooked me because I think this science fiction comparison is true—or, better, truer than any strictly neutral or strictly social scientific model can possibly intend or understand, Riesebrodt's included. The invocation just captures something special between the starlight, space-time travel, psi powers, sublime alien or galactic landscapes, and dramatic special effects that no other model can quite encompass or express.

In whatever form we find this sci-fi-like contact with superhuman potential in unusually gifted human beings, this is precisely "religion's promise." Riesebrodt does not leave it there, though. He goes on to identify the close dialectic or back-and-forth between excessive ascetic practices (fasting, isolation, celibacy) and the activation of superhuman potentials (clairvoyance, healing, divinatory precognition, mind reading) as the "secret logic of religion." The lesson is clear enough: without either of these two dynamic poles (extreme ascetic practices and anomalous superhuman powers), there would be no religion, none worthy of the name anyway. This is what drives the whole thing. This is not only the promise of religion. It is also the secret of religion. It is what religion *is*.

Yep.

There are other ways to say this. Consider the New Testament critic Dale C. Allison Jr., whom we will meet again. As Allison has put it recently, writing on the baffling evidence for the resurrection in both modern and ancient human experience, "Religious life and experience are not the products of a rational solution to a whodunit. They rather involve realms of human experience and conviction that cannot depend on or be undone by the sorts of historical doubts, probabilities, and conjectures with which [historians concern themselves]. There is no religion within the limits of history alone, just as there is no religion within the limits of reason alone."[7]

Put in my own terms now, whatever you want to call this promise or secret of religion, without the excessive, the weird, the strange, the transcendent, the anomalous, the marvelous, the miraculous, the supernatural, the supernormal, the paranormal, the occult, *there is no religion*. Period. Whatever historians or moral philosophers want to say or claim, religion is not finally about history or society or reason or morality or ideology or evolutionary advantage or anything else sensible, explainable, observable,

or even "good." It is about the superhuman. It is about power—a power, moreover, that can save or harm, even kill.

It is *also* about ideology, politics, and people beating each other up, metaphorically or physically. These are especially sad, ugly, horrible histories that almost any of the same words encode, none perhaps more so than *magic* and *miracle*. In fact, *there are no words in the study of religion that are not abused words*. All we have are bad words, as each has arisen from long and extensive religious conflict, mostly in the West between Protestants and Catholics and, deeper still, between the rise of a "world religion" and the indigenous or magical cultures of every land.

Take two world religions. Enemies of both Siddhartha Gotama (who would become the Buddha) and Jesus of Nazareth (who would become the Christ) called the respective charismatic teacher a magician. And this was not a compliment. In both the Buddhist and Christian traditions, to call something magic was generally to locate it strictly in the natural world, in the human, and often in suspicious or hostile intentions to deceive and manipulate. On the other hand, to call something a miracle in, say, the Christian tradition was, and still is, to trace the event back to a divine source or transcendent agency and to argue for the truth and power of such an event as expressive of the tradition.[8] Magic bad, miracle good.

The problem is that it is often simply not possible to tell the difference between the two. To take one painfully obvious example, consider the famous Exodus story where Moses and his brother Aaron are battling the "sorcerers and magicians of Egypt" (Exodus 7:12). Both the Egyptian magicians and Aaron produce a snake out of a staff (the event is identical), but the Hebrew story frames the narrative in such a way that the power of Moses and Aaron is from (their) God, whereas the power of the Egyptian magicians is not. Actually, what the story really says is that Aaron's snake swallowed the Egyptian staff-serpent: his snake was bigger than theirs, to be Freudian about it.

Medieval Christian theologians struggled mightily over this passage, and for obvious and honest reasons. It clearly suggests the phenomena were the same, even as the interpretations were widely different, violently different. One literally eats the other.

If I might signal my own interpretation here, the reason religious traditions have such a hard time distinguishing between magic and miracle is *because there is no difference*. The real differences lie in the ideological interpretations, not in the powers themselves. In my own terms, such potentials are both immanently human or magical and transcendently super or miraculous. They are superhuman, at once immanent and transcendent.

This is why the deeper history of the human species has in fact always been focused on the phenomena of magic.[9] Our contemporary disdain for the same is just a recent monotheistic-scientistic shaming of what is actually our own innate powers—what is actually *us*.

Magic is commonly faked, of course, by both modern stage magicians (who have predictively captured the word and concept in contemporary English) and by traditional shamans, witches, wonder workers, fakirs, yogis, bruhas, you name it. But one fakes or mimics something that is real, and magic is also quite real, even often *in and through the faking*. As I have repeatedly argued, sometimes we need the trick to manifest the truth, the fake to produce the fact. We just have to get out of our dualistic righteousness here. James Randi was *so* wrong. He was the real fake, the man who destroyed honest skepticism.[10]

Consider prayer and spontaneous healing. People pray to all sorts of gods (and saints and virgins), and in every religious tradition on the planet. The local interpretation or deity does not seem to matter *a bit*. Sometimes the truth needs the trick to happen. And sometimes real magic happens. So does spontaneous miraculous healing.

Sorry.

Reading Riesebrodt, it is not clear to me where he lands on all of this or whether he, always the careful sociologist, thought that these superhuman potentials "slumbering in us" are real or imaginary. But both his secret logic and his prose certainly leave the door open—wide open, in fact. I will walk through that open door in the following pages, because I happen to think they are very real, if also imagined, often faked, and, of course, commonly politicized, even sometimes secretly weaponized by world governments that we have come to call, not accidentally, superpowers.[11]

But so it has always been.

AFRICAN GNOSIS AND ANCIENT EGYPT: "ALL IS ONE (GOD)"

The simple, or not so simple, truth is that the history of religions is all about superhumans and superhuman powers—realized, potential, and, yes, mimicked or faked. Such a history is in fact colorfully populated by countless supermen and superwomen (and superhumans whose gender is anything but either—hence all that fierce and conflicted sublimation).

One could look anywhere. Really, *anywhere*.

Consider, as a start, the continent of Africa, where our species originated. Of particular interest with respect to the African religions and

cultures is the philosophical work of V. Y. Mudimbe, a Catholic-trained African intellectual versed in Latin, Greek, African languages, and what he calls the "colonial library"—that is, the vast literary deposits in both Africa and Europe on European-African contact from the fifteenth century on. Mudimbe writes elegantly and complexly of a particular "African gnosis," an "esoteric knowledge" or "secret knowledge" that is not about opinion, science, or any "general intellectual configuration" but something else or other, something, if I may, *before* any such opinion, science, or philosophical system.

Gnosis. It is not an innocent or safe word. It is a potent Greek word rooted in ancient Christianity with a real edge and punch, since the Gnostic Christians were suppressed and likely persecuted for their claims of direct knowledge of divinity and the nature of the soul, which is what they meant by gnosis. And, indeed, such a word invokes for Mudimbe "the experience of rejected forms of wisdom which are not part of the structures of political power and scientific knowledge."[12] It was from this same rejected gnosis that specifically modern African discourses on alterity or otherness, *négritude* or Blackness, and African philosophy itself emerged into the modern world. Mudimbe calls them all to reflect back on themselves, to step out of themselves, as it were, so as to "remain a pertinent question mark."[13]

Mudimbe orbits around such a questioning gnosis and (quite intentionally) never lands. But he does tell us that such a new order of knowledge is most aligned with an anthropology still trying to become a true "discourse on human being," even a "transhistoric thought . . . something like the pure reflection of consciousness in a pure language . . . the starting point of an absolute discourse."[14] These are enigmatic phrases penned by a major intellectual. Mudimbe looks at worldview after worldview, order after order, both African and European, not to believe or accept any of them but to free himself from *all* of them. This is the most radical purpose of his comparativism or anthropology. As he himself once put it: "I wasn't born to administer a particular field of knowledge, nor to be the spokesperson of any specific truth. In my reflection on conflicts of reading and interpretation, I endeavor to freely rid myself of my masks until death shatters them for good."[15]

Identity and culture are nothing more, and nothing less, than *masks* here. The metaphor itself is doubly inflected: by an African aesthetic and ritual sensibility, as well as by the well-known Latin term for person (*persona* or "mask").

Northeastern Africa is today, of course, Egypt, the heart of ancient Med-

iterranean civilization. So many of the religious ideas or beliefs around the superhuman appear to have first taken recognizable shape or cultural form here. The deification of human beings, for example, was the spiritual foundation of the pharaohs, their theocratic authority, their mythologization, and, most dramatically, their famous architecture, in which they themselves commonly appeared in immense forms. They were *huge*.

One such pharaoh, Akhenaten (reigning roughly 1353–1336 BCE), first taught what would much later (not until the sixteenth century, it turns out) be called monotheism—that is, the belief in One God. It was a revelation that threatened to sweep away centuries of polytheistic belief and practice in Egypt before it itself was swept away by the very next pharaoh, only to emerge again, and this time in an eventually more stable form, in what we think of today as ancient Israel.

Akhenaten—whose elongated head, immense eyes, and transgendered bodily appearance does indeed resemble the iconography of the modern-day alien, as contemporary American pop culture asserts—appears to have associated the revelation of the One God with an illuminating orb or radiating disk in the sky (of course he did). Conventional historians and archaeologists want to read this disk as the sun, but that is more than a little deceptive, because the sun is now a thoroughly secularized and materialized concept that does not speak of the One God in the sky, much less reveal the truths of monotheism to an ancient androgynous Egyptian pharaoh-king seeing a living disk in the sky. This one apparently did.

Akhenaten's short-lived monotheism would later be regenerated by another Egyptian by the name of Moses. The mythical or narrative result would be devastating for what happened to Egypt in the later biblical imagination. Egypt, in effect, became the remembered land and culture of paganism, magic, idolatrous polytheism, and all that is oppressive and literally enslaving. It became *that from which one must escape*. Hence the grand narrative and myth of the Exodus, the biblical story of the Israelite escape from Egypt under the leadership of the adopted Egyptian prophet Moses (a story, by the way, for which we do not possess a single shred of solid and reliable historical evidence). This is how the monotheistic religions that stem from the Bible "structure the relationship between the old and the new in terms not of evolution but of revolution."[16] The truth can only come from the outside, never from within. The natural world, like Egypt, is in error. Truth comes from God, or Israel, or the Bible.

Before and behind such a monotheistic rise, however, was a much older Egyptian conviction in what Jan Assmann calls cosmotheism—the belief that the universe is itself God. Assmann also calls this an "evolutionary" or

"inclusive" monotheism, since it evolved or developed out of an older polytheism (something remarkably similar happened in India with the Hindu polytheistic and then monotheistic traditions, by the way).

Such a view can also be found in the history of Western philosophy, particularly in founding humanist figures such as Baruch Spinoza (1632–77), one of the original theorists of a liberal democratic state, of a universe of natural law and determinism, and of the professional study of religion, including and especially our modern suspicions around the Bible (Spinoza was one of the first to point out that Moses could not have possibly written the first five books of the Torah). Iconically, this much revered humanist was excommunicated from his own Sephardic Jewish community in Amsterdam on July 27, 1656, for his "monstrous deeds" and "abominable heresies." Perhaps not too surprisingly, Spinoza was someone with whom the later Nietzsche (and Albert Einstein) would feel much kinship.

I probably cannot emphasize enough that Spinoza's famous Latin formula, *deus sive natura* (God or nature), could easily function as the motto of the superhumanities described in these pages. Both sides of the equation, after all, are acknowledged: transcendence *and* immanence, God *and* nature, not one or the other.[17] This was what Spinoza very seriously called his "divine naturalism" and *amor intellectus dei* or "intellectual love of God." Spinoza may have well been the first to see clearly the secular and scientific lineaments of the modern world, but he was also famously God-obsessed. In his own abstract terms, God alone is substance, and creatures are nothing but its modes. In the words of one of his most gifted biographers, Spinoza was "a heretic with the character of a true believer, a saint without a religion."[18] In our own modern terms, he was profoundly spiritual but not religious (there's a double understatement).

For Assmann now, Spinozoa's Latin motto, *deus sive natura*, *erases* what Assmann calls the Mosaic distinction, that is, the fundamentally exclusive logic of monotheism that must reject every other deity and subsequently influenced so much of the religious intolerance, conflict, and violence of Western history. Such a potent gnomon, after all, denies any real distinction between a transcendent God and an immanent nature. Assmann, then, is writing of the very spirit of the superhumanities when he writes lines such as these: "This deconstruction was as revolutionary as Moses's construction. It immediately led to a new appraisal of Egypt. The Egyptians were Spinozists and 'cosmotheists.' Ancient cosmotheism as a basis of intercultural translation was rediscovered. In the discourse of the Enlightenment, it was reconstructed as an international and intercultural mystery religion in the fashion of Freemasonry."[19]

Such scholarship implies, or shouts, that the deepest origins of such a cosmotheism do not lie in Europe, among the Dutch, or even in a banned Baruch Spinoza and the beginnings of the modern (super)humanities. Much less do they lie in the Bible. *They lie in ancient Egypt*. They also lie in the ancient Greek world, itself, of course, in deep conversation with Egyptian culture just across the sea. Hence the antique Greek expression *hen to pan*, "All is One," or, to gloss it further, "the world *is* God."[20]

THE HERMETIC RENAISSANCE AND THE BIRTH OF THE HUMANITIES

In the West, at least, this ancient cosmotheism, this conviction that "All is One," is the most basic conviction of what we today call the Hermetic revelation and trace back to the first few centuries of the Common Era and the idealized figure of Hermes, often called simply "the Egyptian" in Christian history. Even more significantly for our present interests, the same Hermetic revelation lay at the core of what we now call, looking back, the Italian Renaissance.

The Italian Renaissance was in some real sense the early birth of our present-day humanities. This was a broad spiritual and intellectual movement understood by its founders to be a rebirth (hence *renaissance*) and recovery of ancient Egyptian, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew esoteric wisdom.

Perhaps no one did more toward such a rebirth than Marsilio Ficino (1433–99). Ficino was what we would today call a classicist, a scholar of Greek and Latin.[21] More specifically, he was an expert on an author whom his era called the "divine Plato," "divine" for his philosophy of a higher reality beyond the senses and the opinions of the merely rational mind. Christian theologians had long thought of the Platonic worldview as a kind of foreshadowing or premonition of the fuller revelations of Christ and the fulfillment of Christianity. Ficino certainly thought so.

In 1463, Ficino was hard at work translating the Greek writings of Plato into Latin for his immensely wealthy patron, the banker and patron of the arts, Cosimo de' Medici. The year before, Medici had founded a new Platonic academy in Florence, with Ficino leading it. The original Greek academy (probably as loose-knit as its Florentine reincarnation), founded in 387 BCE and named after a sacred grove outside Athens (*akademei*) had long ago run its course. Its later pagan revival, founded in 410 CE and now dedicated to the teaching of Neoplatonic wisdom and practice as well, was suppressed by the pope in 524 CE. The now dominant Christian churches had in fact waged a long, sometimes deadly, centuries-long war on pagan

culture, despite the fact that the Church itself was deeply indebted to Greek and Roman thought, culture, and political practices.

Medici was using his seemingly endless resources to scour Europe for rare books. One of his book buyers, a monk by the name of Leonardo da Pistoia, had found a real doozy. As the story is often told, the seventy-four-year-old Medici burst into Ficino's study one day and told him to stop translating Plato, immediately, and instead to work on *this*. The text became known, in Ficino's eventual translation, as the *Book on the Power and Wisdom of God, Whose Title Is Pimander*, or simply, and more mercifully, *Pimander*.

Medici had reason to burst in. He was old, his days were numbered, and this text promised to hold the very secrets of life and death, really of the entire universe. He would indeed read it before he died, and Ficino's translation would become the most well-known and oft-cited translation for the next few centuries of what we now call the *Corpus Hermeticum*, or the *Collected Writings of Hermes*.

Hermes, known in Christian history as Hermes Trismegistus (Thrice-Great, as in really, really, *really* great), was a kind of cultural fusion of the Greek god of communication and liminal spaces Hermes and the Egyptian god of language, magic, and writing, the ibis-headed Thoth. For Ficino and his readers, this awe-inspiring sage was an actual historical person and one of the key transmitters of the *prisca theologia*, the "ancient theology" that was said to lie at the root and inspiration of all the great religions and that led up to the penultimate revelations of the divine Plato and, eventually, to Christ himself (this was their understanding of religious pluralism, their comparative religion). Hermes, again, was associated throughout much of Christian history with Egypt and its primordial wisdom. Significantly, for what will come later (that is, in Nietzsche), Ficino would place Zoroaster, the great Persian prophet and moral reformer, ahead of Hermes in this same theological lineage.[22]

Later (Protestant) scholarship in the person of Isaac Causabon (1559–1614) would establish that the Hermetic writings purchased by Medici and translated by Ficino were in fact not as ancient as the (Catholic) Renaissance humanists believed; they actually came from the first few centuries of the Common Era and so postdated the origins of Christianity by hundreds of years. They did not predict or foresee the rise of Christianity. They came after such a rise.

Today, after the advances of scholarship and the discovery and editing of other related Hermetic documents, we know much more about the historical transmission of the Hermetic texts, their Christian editing at

the hands of pious scribes (whose obvious insertions gave the sense that the text was looking forward to Christian theology), and the impossibility of treating any of them in a literal or naive fashion. But even in Causabon's time, it was clear that there simply was no such ancient theological lineage—at least not one that looked anything like what Ficino and his followers claimed.

But this was simply not known at the time. For the original humanists, such an ancient wisdom had been lost and forgotten. In what seemed like a miracle, such a revelation was now available again through the patronage of Medici and the translation labors of Ficino and was about to be released into the world, no doubt to great, maybe even apocalyptic, effect.

Regardless of its post-Christian composition, the *Corpus Hermeticum* was a remarkable text, particularly for our interests here (for which its later composition is irrelevant). Indeed, these writings are positively filled with textualized expressions of some kind of transcendent faculty of consciousness and perception (*nous*) that can really perceive and so come to know a God or Source that both transcends and *is* the physical universe—in short, a cosmotheism in Assmann's sense. *Nous* is often translated "mind"—or, better, "Mind." That captures something, for sure, but the *nous* is so much more, and, very significantly, it beams into the body not in the brain and skull cavity but through the heart or cardiac region. As we will see soon enough, the *nous* is also a radically reflexive, circular, or nondual capacity, because *it is what it knows*.

Because the same Hermetic texts, however corrupted, heavily edited, and incomplete, and their central capacity of the *nous* lie at the historical origins of the humanities in Renaissance Italy, we would do well to dwell on them more deeply alongside other Hermetic texts from other historical deposits, including the famous find of Coptic Gnostic scriptures near Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt in 1945. I will attempt a brief synopsis or reconstruction of the Hermetic worldview primarily through the work of one of our most erudite and gifted scholars of religion working today: the Dutch historian of Western esotericism Wouter J. Hanegraaff.

The first thing to understand about the Hermetic worldview around which the Italian humanities emerged is that the convictions and claims of the Hermetic texts were not abstract speculations or empty cognitive exercises. They almost certainly reflected actual experiential practices, probably of small groups of initiates and enlightened teachers meeting privately and confidentially during the first few centuries of the Common Era in the homes and temple precincts of Egypt—that spiritual heart and "Temple of the Whole World," as one ancient author put it.[23]

This experiential base is why Hanegraaff insists on approaching this founding historical transmission as a Hermetic *spirituality* dealing with salvational knowledge or *gnosis*, that is, a "privatized, experiential-oriented religion" whose truths transcended any local place or temple and whose priests and rituals served traveling pilgrims in a cosmopolitan Mediterranean, Egyptian, and African world. In a related spirit, Hanegraaff points out that many of the most revelatory moments in the Hermetica happen *spontaneously* and *suddenly* and not in any formal ritual or institutional context. In essence, these key moments are presented as "dramatic alterations of consciousness," not formal ceremonial claims.[24]

Refreshingly, Hanegraaff refuses to do what so many scholars of religion want to do, namely, turn this cosmopolitan spirituality into some kind of "cynical commercialism" or, in dismissive academic-speak, a snarkily economic and narcissistic "spiritual marketplace." Instead, for Hanegraaff this is simply what happens to esoteric knowledge when it enters a cosmopolitan social space. In effect, it goes global. "This is very much how things still work in contemporary spiritual contexts on the global marketplace, and we have no reason to assume they would work in any way differently in Roman Egypt."[25]

Precisely because such a gnosis is considered transcendent and not dependent on any local cultural source or expression, these spiritualities are structurally eclectic and are most happy borrowing from almost anyone and anything they encounter in the social surround, incorporating what April DeConick colloquially calls "everything but the kitchen sink." DeConick also rejects the politically correct academic judgments here, emphasizing instead that such eclectic spiritualities are structurally "countercultural" and that they stand very much against, or above, the "servant spiritualities" of the public religions (in which God or the gods are imagined to be kings, lords, or slave masters demanding submission, servitude, and sacrifice). Instead, such revolutionary gnostic spiritualities work out of a bold logic that flows from a direct and experiential encounter with the natural depths of the human being, a transcendent hidden God who *frees* one from all such ignorant servility and endless sacrificial service.[26]

And why *not* borrow widely and wildly, if one is knowing from a transcendent perspective beyond all culture; if, in the understanding of the Hermetic texts, God is "that which is everywhere and nowhere" and so not restricted to any particular place or people? Why restrict oneself to this or that local temple, to this or that local deity, if the true Source or God is "anywhere and nowhere," if the whole point of the spiritual life is coming

to know oneself as a "becoming everything," a "pervading every body," and a "filling everyone's mind"?[27] Indeed, why *not* combine different relative cultural forms in new ways if one has actually experienced one's own *nous* to be exactly like that of God and realized, no doubt with a shock, that the whole notion of anything or anyone being truly "other" is illusory and simply mistaken?[28]

These are rhetorical questions, of course. Scholars have generally missed entirely the force and plausibility of what I will call below a transcendent comparative logic, mostly because they reject any possibility of such a transcendence. They know nothing of the Egyptian-Greek *nous* or DeConick's hidden God. As a result, they have subtly or not so subtly condemned such implicit comparisons, such a mixing and matching of every "smallest place," with various bad names, none more judgmental and morally righteous than today's "appropriation." It turns out that the African Egyptians were doing precisely this two millennia before those awful Californians. Of course, it made perfect sense then, as it does now. The comparative practice followed naturally and inevitably once one understood the transcendent logic or, better, had realized one's own deeper identity with the cosmic God within the *nous* of the heart.

Hanegraaff, for example, argues that a particular modern phrase—one, I should add, with deep Hindu, North American metaphysical, and countercultural evolutionary resonances—is especially appropriate to describe what is being expressed in some of these ancient Egyptian-Greek texts: "cosmic consciousness." Hanegraaff observes that the man who made this phrase most famous, the Canadian psychiatrist and Whitmanian mystic Richard Maurice Bucke (1837–1902), coined the expression after a self-described moment of mystical illumination that is "remarkably similar" to what the Hermetic texts call "becoming the *aion*" in the Hermetic texts (*aion* is a Greek term, often mistranslated "eternity," that is understood to be the fundamental reality beyond both human subjectivity and the material world). Indeed, these two different cultural moments are remarkably similar, no doubt because they emerged from similar, or identical, states of knowledge.[29]

Such ancient-to-modern resonances continue. While such an ancient gnosis and *nous* and their subsequent eclectic comparative practices inevitably engaged the natural sciences of the time (astronomy, physics, medicine, you name it), these interactions never quite lived up to the demands of the ancient Egyptian, Roman, and Greek specialists. But, like a New Age spiritual treatise engaging quantum physics or psychoanalysis, this "does not really matter all that much."[30] After all, to focus on the specific

inconsistencies of such a cultural collage ("this does not really belong with that") or, frankly, on the inevitable misunderstanding of this or that natural science ("Well, this is not what Aristotle meant"), is precisely to miss the deeper point. It is to focus on the technical mistakes of the graffiti scratches on the wooden handrail and not look up to see the Grand Canyon the handrail is preventing you from falling into.

For the Hermetic authors, the Grand Canyon to look up and see is the transcendent conviction that *all* things are divine, including the human, a being who is described by the *Asclepius*, another key Hermetic text, as a kind of middle "god," a "happy mixture" of the extraterrestrial divine Source and terrestrial matter. As doubled, as a middle mixture, such a human god can look down on itself from above, since it participates in, *is* both worlds.[31] Hence the common trope in the ancient world of "the human as double."[32]

But *how* does the human look down on itself from above? How does it realize its own doubleness? By special individuals becoming enlightened by the higher capacity of the *nous*, a very special organ of perception that, please note again, cannot be slotted into our usual boxes of mind, intellect, or consciousness, which are the usual (mis)translations. Indeed, as the "eye of the heart," the *nous* is both the organ that perceives reality as it really is and that reality that is perceived. It is what it knows, and it knows what it is. To use the technical terms of philosophy, the *nous* possesses both an epistemological and an ontological status. To employ an Asian-inflected term that scholars of the Hermetica are increasingly using, the knowledge/being textualized here is *nondual*. This is what Hanegraaff, following Plato, calls the "third kind."[33]

In a fascinating move of the Hermetic texts as interpreted by Hanegraaff, the third kind is also related to the powers of the imagination, but of a very special kind—*God's*. This is not a limited perspective. This is a universal perspective from everywhere and nowhere at once, a "being consciously present at all times and in all places simultaneously (*homou*)."[34] Listen to Hermes speak of how the *nous* "noeticizes" itself, becomes God, as it were:

> All beings are in God—not as though they were in some place . . . but in a different manner: they rest in his incorporeal imagination [*en asōmatōi phantasiāi*]. . . . You must conceive of God as having all *noēmata* in himself: those of the cosmos, himself, the all. Therefore unless you make yourself equal to God, you cannot understand [*noēsai*] God. Like is understood only by like. Allow yourself to grow larger until you are equal to him who is

> immeasurable, outleap all that is corporeal, transcend all time, and become the *aiōn*—then you will understand [*noēseis*] God.[35]

Sound fantastic? Yes, of course. As the texts have it, this is a matter of "wonder" and "amazement." That's the point, for God's sake (really, *for God's sake*).

Hanegraaff explains the ever-present reality of such a nondual organ/reality but also why it is so rarely known: "We are not dealing here with a spiritual elitism according to which only a few human beings are privileged to have *nous* and are capable of finding salvation. Rather, the universal divine Source has generously made the gift of *nous* available to all human beings, but the sad reality is that only few of them show any interest. Most people are living lives that make them simply incapable of receiving it: they allow themselves to be 'deceived by delusionary images' rather than cultivating their potential for receiving *nous*."[36] As the ancient authors often described it in a metaphor, the sun continues to pour down its generous rays on everyone at all times, but most are too dull to receive them fully, or even to notice them.

But the enlightened teachers of the Hermetic texts *did* make use of the sun's generous rays. And they were changed by them, spiritually, physically, metaphysically. As we would now put it, they even claimed to travel into outer space. As Hanegraaff has it, they "had encountered transcendent beings and traveled out of their bodies to places beyond the stars." They had learned "the supreme universal Source of Light and Life" and knew how to "perceive reality as it really is."[37] Their goal? For Hanegraaff again, "to heal the soul from its afflictions and restore the human spirit to its original condition of wholeness, divine consciousness, omniscience, even omnipotence."[38] To return to my outer space language, the further goal was to transcend the physical cosmos of the seven planetary spheres and achieve what Hanegraaff calls "a direct experience of supra-cosmic realities that was possible only for those who had already become the *aion*."[39]

Hanegraaff cautions us not to imagine this ultimate goal in any spatiotemporal terms, as if the *aion* was "after" the seventh planet "out there" somewhere. That is just the dualistic brain thinking its thoughts again. Rather, becoming the *aion*, or eternal source of everything, meant *becoming everything all at once*, including the physical cosmos and its seven planets, or what we would today call the solar system.

If this is not legitimate science fiction, what is?

In any case, this was indeed the "Way of Hermes." As I trust it is clear by now, this Way has little to do with the thinking or sense perception of

the brain. It had *everything* to do with occult practices such as animating statues (likely through the inhaling of psychoactive incense), a doubled understanding of the *phantastikon*, or "imagination" (as both a spinner of fantasy but also a potential organ of empirical-mystical knowledge, including God's knowledge), and the general subject of magic.

The obvious magical components of the Hermetic gnosis is something traditional philosophy can only dismiss and demean as nonsense. Hanegraaff points out that the same prejudice against magic has racial or ethnic roots, as it displays a strong, really bigoted, preference for "rational" Greece over "magical" Egypt. God forbid anything in holy Greece actually came from pagan Egypt—an Egypt, moreover, that once made slaves of the early Israelites, an Egypt from which the same Israelites had to escape to get to the "holy land." By the time modernity was on the rise in fifteenth-century Europe, Jewish and Christian monotheism had had a very long battle with the indigenous magical cultures of the Mediterranean and northern European worlds. It did not go well, particularly for the indigenous magical cultures.

These battles and violences against magical practice were later carried on in the academic scholarship. All the magic and occultism of the Hermetica, for example, could only be, as one early scholar described it in 1924, so much "masses of rubbish," so much "astrology, magic, alchemy, and pseudo-science."[40] Alas, this exact same language is still with us today not just among monotheists but by their successors, materialist scientists. Thankfully, scholars of the Hermetica have abandoned such judgments since the 1990s as historically false and as, frankly, racist.

They are.

The Hermetica themselves, of course, know nothing of such intellectualized racism and cultural bigotry. The authors of these texts would have no doubt understood such esoteric phenomena in the larger context of a belief in the perceptive powers of the human imagination (*phantasia* or *phantastikon*), again often activated by "herbs" or psychoactive plants, and in the subsequent out-of-body travels of the luminous or fiery, often spherical, astral vehicle of the soul (*ochema*). Ioan Coulionu once playfully referred to the *ochema* as a kind of ancient "space shuttle" that can take off into outer space but also return to the Earth safely—to bring Coulianu's 1980s and early 1990s language up to date, what we have here is a humanoid UFO.[41]

It is really not possible to overemphasize the model or theory of the human imagination as two here. Yes, it daydreams and fantasizes, but it also can do more, *way* more. Such an imaginal *phantastikon* can be "woken

up . . . by the gods to modes of apparition that are totally different from what human beings are accustomed to," indeed that might be entirely invisible and perceptible only to the *nous* of the heart within a different kind of divine radiance or luminosity, an altered state of energy, as it were.[42] Hanegraaff, for example, tells the story of one earlier writer who, after engaging in a magical practice that involved licking some letters composed of myrrh and a special honey (literally psychedelic texts!), was "super amazed" (*hyperethaumasa*) by the results.[43]

Super, indeed. Here we have more altered states that reveal the human as superhuman. As one woman, after having her face rubbed with a psychedelic ointment, reminds the threatening presences that appear before her just after she hears the sound of crashing thunder, she, too, is an immortal being, like them. "Silence!" she hushes. "I am a star, wandering about with you."[44]

We are back in outer space.

In short, the Italian Renaissance was really the Hermetic Renaissance. The birth of the humanities was really the birth of the superhumanities, which we have now mostly forgotten, much as the temporary clouds block the rays of the sun that are always pouring down on us.

THE GREAT SECRET

Africa and ancient Egypt were hardly alone in their superhumanisms. Similar beliefs and experiences were common across the planet, including across the sea from Egypt, in ancient Greece. Enter the *hyperanthropos* (literally, "superman" or "superhuman"), a figure who first appears as a word in the Greek writer Lucian of Samosata around 150 CE but really captures a concept or conviction that was dominant in Greek culture at least from Homer on, which, in some sense, really *is* ancient Greek culture.

Here is Paul Monaghan, every one of whose historical references is relevant to our present concerns:

> I am using the term *hyperanthropos* as a useful shorthand for a concept that had appeared in one form or the other from Homer and Hesiod onwards, was dominant in Greek culture, and has continued to play an important role in Western metaphysics. The *hyperanthropos* was, and is, either part man, part god (for example, the Homeric Heroes), or a man who is raised well above ordinary men by reason of his intellect (philosophers), physical abilities (athletes), or the great benefits he provides mankind (such as Prometheus). The protagonist in Greek tragedy was a *hyperanthropos* who

> had been "separated out" from the Chorus, and whose actions had enormous ramifications for that community of ordinary (often very ordinary) men and women. Socrates himself was seen as a protagonist and *hyperanthropos* by Plato, and Plato has been regarded as such throughout the centuries, along with the ancient Greeks in general. Jesus Christ, the Renaissance (and Nineteenth Century) alchemist, Marx's "world-historical individual," Nietzsche's Übermensch, and the Romantic and Modernist artist-genius (with whom Prometheus was associated . . .) are all *hyperanthropoi*.[45]

Superhumans all.

One need hardly restrict oneself to northeastern Africa or the ancient Mediterranean or Near Eastern worlds to find superhumans. Again, they are *everywhere* (because they are everyone), especially in that immense reach of cultures and civilizations we too casually call "Asia."

Consider the Mughal emperor Akbar (1542–1605). Akbar's long reign in northern India tripled the size of the Mughal empire as it fused different social, literary, and religious strands into a unique Indo-Persian culture. That was hardly the all of it, though. Akbar appears to have had some kind of mystical experience on a tiger hunt in northern India on April 22, 1578. The only reference we have to it is the Persian text *Akbarnama*, or *The Names of Akbar*, an immense work of royal hagiography.

The relevant pages speak of "the glory of unity" being bestowed on the king during the hunt, a glory, moreover, that could not be understood by those around him, or barely understood by the already enlightened ascetics: "A sublime joy took possession of his bodily frame. The attraction of cognition of God cast its ray." Employing a classic Sufi trope, the text compares the experience to intoxication by wine and casts serious doubts on the understanding of those who have not entered the "tavern of Unity" to know what he knew or, better, taste what he tasted. The moral effects were immediate and dramatic. He set free "many thousands of animals" after his "desire for one-ness prevailed."[46]

There would be other apparent effects. Akbar would go on to found his own "college" of comparative religion, whose nature and scope is debated to this day and, apparently, was in Akbar's own time as well.[47] The official Mughal sources simply call it "discipleship" (*muridi*), a term that might suggest some kind of exalted spiritual status for the emperor, akin to a Hindu guru, for example. Later tradition seems to support such a reading, calling this enigmatic collective the emperor's *Dini-i-Ilahi*, "Religion of God," or the *Tawhid-i-Ilahi*, "Oneness of God."

The latter expression possesses clear Sufi connotations that harken back to some of the most radical unitive currents of the Islamic mystical tradition, particularly the Arabic "Great Master" Ibn al-'Arabi (1165–1240), who had argued three centuries earlier that the different religions are necessary—indeed, ecstatic visionary or "imaginal"—expressions of God's ultimate metaphysical Unity.[48]

Whatever the sources of his inspiration and conviction, Akbar now hosted, and in different places, scholars and ascetics of the Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Zoroastrian, and Roman Catholic traditions, among others, to discuss and debate their different doctrines. Among more ultimate aims, such a comparative project clearly sought to encourage religious tolerance and social cohesion on a practical political level through discussion, debate, and the sharing of insights into the world's religious traditions, particularly around and in their most esoteric currents.

Akbar's grandson, Prince Dara Shikoh (1615–59), was especially keen to carry on his grandfather's work of religious unity and comparative mysticism. He was the eldest and favored son of Akbar's son and successor, the emperor Shah Jahan, who built the Taj Mahal. In short, Dara was the heir apparent of the throne. Like his grandfather before him, Dara was drawn deeply to comparative mystical literature and held court with Muslim Sufis and Hindu philosophers with the understanding that the deeper truths of the two traditions were the same truths. How could they not be, if indeed all was really One? As William C. Chittick has explained in such detail, to think Islamically of the plurality of religions, particularly within Islam's esoteric traditions, is to think through and with the absolute Unity of God. The sameness of God transcends all local imaginal or human differences.[49]

Very much working and thinking out of this Islamic esoteric stress on Oneness, Dara would sponsor an influential Persian translation of some fifty Hindu Upanishads, or "secret teachings," many of which had long been considered sacred scripture and had become the basis for the famous philosophical school of nondualism (Advaita Vedanta). These were collected and translated into Persian under Dara's sponsorship as the *Sirr-i-Akbar*, *The Great Secret* (a title, perhaps not accidentally, also encoding his beloved grandfather's name). The great secret was that, since God and everything else is One, the truths of Islam and Hinduism are also one. *All is One*. We are back to ancient Egypt.

In the preface to the work, Dara writes that he "was impressed with a longing to behold the gnostics of every sect, and . . . desirous of bringing in view all the heavenly books."[50]

Dara's grandfather would have been proud. But his younger brother was

not. Aurangzeb went to war with his older brother and had him executed on the grounds of apostasy from Islam. Aurangzeb's murderous ploy, of course, also conveniently removed his older brother from his ascension to the imperial throne, no doubt "for the glory of God," as the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer was to acidly comment later.[51]

This great secret and its complicated story of Mughal imperial support, Hindu nondualism, religious tolerance, and political murder is of more than passing interest here, since it was this same seventeenth-century Persian collection that would eventually be discovered by a French traveler and scholar by the name of A. H. Anquetil-Duperron, who would carefully and reverently translate the great secret into a Latin text (and relate its contents to the Renaissance Hermetic comparative theologies of Italy) that would inspire, awe, and guide the same Arthur Schopenhauer.

For now, allow me to continue our romp through the history of human deification. Consider medieval China. Here we might invoke all those whom Robert Ford Campany calls the "transcendents," the "immortals," or the "ascendents"—ancient Chinese individuals who took up various "esoteric biospiritual practices" to attain "supernormal" or "paranormal powers" and become *xian* (deathless godlike beings) and so helped birth what we now call Daoism. It was precisely through such practices and claims that "adepts were distinguishing themselves as a class of figures and arguing the superiority of their kind over all others, even ancestors and gods."[52] In short, superhumans.

The transnational Buddhist traditions have offered other models of what a superhuman might be, or have been. Indeed, the Buddhist traditions have claimed countless superhumans (as numerous as there are atoms in a universe, as the Chinese texts often have it), who do things like manipulate the structures of space and time, describe transcendent visions of a vast hyperdimensional multiverse in which the past, present, and future all coexist (a claim that has been reproduced in at least one contemporary scholar's transtemporal experience, moreover[53]), remember and reincarnate over countless lives as they evolve toward greater and greater forms of their own innate Buddha-nature and eventual, inevitable enlightenment. Significantly, emotional states and psychological complexes such as anger, selfishness, and narcissism and acts of violence of all kinds are generally seen as obstacles along the path to the superhuman, while compassion, affection, and all-inclusive love are generally seen as integral to enlightenment.

Such traditions, moreover, are replete with social practices, specific intentional vows, and elaborate "path manuals" that display both stable

social institutions (like same-sex monasteries) and detailed philosophical, emotional, cognitive, and bodily techniques for realizing such a superhumanity. Exactly as Riesebrodt argued, the two privileged practices that are believed to elicit or actualize such potentials are asceticism and meditative concentration. Such Buddhist practitioners, then, do not just imagine the superhuman; *they practice the superhuman*. Indeed, so common have such practices and phenomena been that the earliest Pali monastic rules included a prohibition against monks and nuns revealing their superhuman powers (*iddhi* or *rdhhi*) to laypeople, an ancient South Asian real-world version of the contemporary superhero's double, alter ego, or secret identity.[54]

It is of some significance for our present purposes that the contemporary scholar of Buddhism who probably knows more than anyone about such powers in the South and East Asian Buddhist literatures, David Fiordalis, has chosen to translate the technical terms for these extraordinary abilities as "superhuman powers," a perfect cross-cultural match with Riesebrodt again.[55] It is not difficult to see why. Such powers are already described in the oldest Pali canonical texts as *uttari-manussa-dhamma*, which translates as "superhuman feats." Perhaps this is why the words "superhuman" and "superpower" are standard categories in the study of Buddhism today.

The South Asian Jain traditions are just as exemplary here, if much less studied. Perhaps the most well-known historical founder of the tradition is Vardhamana (sixth century BCE), otherwise known by his religious epithet as Mahavira, which is usually translated as "Great Hero" but which, with the slightest spin, can easily be rendered "Superhero." It is *that* close. Much more significantly, and certainly more artistically and ritually important, is the fact of the immense physical stature of the Tirthankaras, the Ford-Crossers who, despite no longer being present in the material universe, are worshipped by the lay community. Their immense stone images tower over the faithful, as if to represent the astonishing stature and supernature of the transcendent soul, completely liberated from the material world of action and attachment.

Indeed, so iconic are such figures that Nicholas F. Gier featured a Ford-Crosser on the cover of his book *Spiritual Titanism*, which vigorously and rigorously criticizes these obvious superhumanisms but also correctly identifies them as major and consistent currents within the Indian, Chinese, and European civilizational complexes. In India, Gier identifies the Jain, Samkhya, and Yoga traditions as particularly apt expressions of Titanism, which he defines as "an extreme form of humanism that does not recognize that there are limits to what humans can become and what they

should do." Whereas the Titans of ancient Greek mythology were known for their boundless pride and violence, Indian Titanism has expressed itself "almost exclusively in an internal, spiritual way; therefore, one can say that it is a rather benign form of extreme humanism."[56]

Alas, things have not always been so benign. Such extreme humanisms, or superhumanisms, have often turned ugly. And so the history of religions is also the history of political power, massive violence (religions are the ultimate weapons of mass destruction), social intolerance, torture, enslavement, criminalization, shame, guilt, persecution, heresy, and genocide. The history of magic is little, if any, better. It is also a history of sexual manipulation and predation, of hunting and war, of countless superhuman powers invoked to harm and to kill, and "evil" or sorcerous superhumans of all sorts. Whether conceptualized in religious or magical terms, this is a history that makes the superhero comics and movies look tame in comparison, the original and most long-running science fiction movie of all time.

WHAT THE SUPERHUMANITIES ARE

If the history of religions is a long, long history of legitimate science fiction, then what are the superhumanities? The superhumanities are relatively secularized echoes and rational theorizations of this history of legitimate science fiction. As such, they constitute a whole spectrum of paradoxical intellectual practices that emerge from the direct or immediate realization of forms of consciousness that overflow or transcend all local culture, socialized ego, and morality (the history of religions) that *nevertheless* can only express themselves in and as those very forms of culture, ego, and morality (humanism). If you understand that fundamental both-and, that fusion of "God" and humanism, of Spinoza's *deus sive natura*, then you understand the superhumanities.

In some sense, this is a one-word book, and you read it as soon as you read the fused coinage of the title: the superhumanities.

You just read it again. That's it. You're done.

But maybe you want to hear more. The neologism, after all, is overdetermined, as a psychoanalyst might say of a dream symbol. Or maybe the expression is the very "navel" of the dream of this book, as Freud had it, an unfathomable portal or whirlpool into some unspeakable depths. I certainly intend many different things by the little phrase and will spend the next few hundred pages trying to explain myself.

Or getting sucked down the whirlpool. The whirlpool, moreover, will disappear into the river, which will disappear into the ocean.

Goodbye.

But not yet. Although my concern in this book is primarily with intellectual histories and academic practices and politics, I want to emphasize at the outset that I do not see these knowledge-powers as the property of the academy or of academics *in any way*. Indeed, I think some of the strongest superhuman currents flow outside these elite institutions altogether, in both traditional and nontraditional religious experience, in popular culture, in film, in literature, in countless books, blogs, and podcasts, and behind the security clearances of military, intelligence, and corporate structures (talk about esotericism). I did not spend much of my adult life writing about comic books, science fiction, alien abductions, UFOs, and near-death experiences for nothing—*this is where the action is*. Perhaps more accurately, I see such superhuman currents flowing *between* these countless individuals, popular expressions, and various elite institutions and so gradually emerging into the public culture in both positive and negative, constructive and destructive, really smart and truly stupid ways.

Still, one works where one is, not where one is not. I am most interested, then, in influencing institutions and knowledge practices in the academy that can cultivate such currents of power toward positive, constructive, and thoughtful ends. Toward these very specific goals, we might define the superhumanities in five increasingly speculative movements. I should add that, strictly speaking, one only need accept the first definition to accept the superhumanities. The remaining four definitions are optional, but they are nevertheless how I understand the expression.

1. The Fantastic Past and Present: What We Already Are

First, by the superhumanities, I mean something that already exists. I intend a loving homage to the humanities as they already are and have long been. I mean to point to *a fantastic but forgotten dimension of the humanities*, which consists of the catalytic presence of altered states of mind and energy that have driven the creative processes of some our most revered authors, artists, and activists. In this first and most fundamental sense, the superhumanities are nothing more, and nothing less, than the humanities themselves, now seen anew and celebrated as astonishing. The superhumanities are the Superman to the Clark Kent of the humanities, the weird crashed alien to the dull bespectacled human in the office. Same guy, different costume. Don't be tricked by the lame glasses.

There is a less mythical way to say this. I do not believe that some of the most impactful, really world-changing ideas of the humanities emerged

from thinking, much less cognitive, logical, or linear thought. I think they emerged from altered states of knowledge and energy, that they were experienced as *given*. They crash-landed. This does not mean that such world-changing ideas were religious in any traditional sense (although sometimes they were) or even that this givenness does not always have a history (hence the "myth of the given" in contemporary thought). But it does mean that these forms of alien thought or experienced given graces cannot be understood in any conventional mode and that they are often not under the control of the conscious ego or reasonable thinker.

We do not think. We are thought.

A strong corollary follows. To the extent that we reduce or restrict the humanities to strictly conscious and intentional rational or cognitive modes, or, frankly, social or historical modes, we will not see all that the humanities already are. And we will make them increasingly culturally irrelevant and spiritually insignificant.

In truth, I have been trying to say something like this for almost three decades. I first explored the core idea of the superhumanities (that the human has always been superhuman) in the form of another related idea—namely, that scholars of mysticism are often closeted mystics—in a big book that no one reads called *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom* (2001). But, in truth, I had already enacted these same ideas, practiced them, secretly performed them in the hated and harassed *Kali's Child* (1995), whose chapters are organized around an electrcomagnetic "abduction" and out-of-body experience that took place in the fall of 1989 in Calcutta. In short, I was already *doing it* before I was writing about it or, much less, theorizing it.

Such a positing of the humanities as *already* the superhumanities can also be read as a development of the thesis of Jason A. Josephson-Storm that the human sciences (and the sciences) have always been enchanted and that the constant claim that modernity is somehow mythless, that it arose by a rejection of animism, magic, myth, and the paranormal is simply false. The claim of absence is itself a myth, the purest myth of all in some sense: the myth that there is no myth. Such a constantly touted but deeply mistaken claim goes back to Max Weber (again) and his famous argument and accompanying phrase *die Entzauberung der Welt*, literally "the de-magic-ing of the world."[57]

It never happened, not in any complete or accomplished sense anyway. Often, indeed, if we really look at intellectual history, "in a single room, we can find both séance and science."[58] And so Josephson-Storm's book begins in Paris, in 1907, with Marie Curie, the double Nobel Prize win-

ner (in physics and chemistry) who discovered radiation, and her husband, Pierre, attending a séance with the Italian super-medium Eusapia Palladino.

Eusapia was a kind of occult nuclear reactor in her own right. But what kind of energy was this? The attendants witnessed up close and personal luminous points around Palladino's head and a "glowing luminescence" that the medium ran through Madame Curie's own hair. Pierre was blunt enough: "In my opinion, there is here a whole domain of completely new facts and physical states of space about which we have had no conception." Marie was similarly forthcoming: "Personally, I am quite willing to accept the existence of unusual powers in mediums such as Eusapia or Ms. Stanislawa [Tomczyk]." In Josephson-Storm's opening volley, Madame Curie "was conjuring ghosts or studying paranormal manifestations as part of her physics research."[59]

So were a long line of founding humanist, social scientific, and scientific authors in their own research. And so Josephson-Storm shows us how "the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) emerged as academic disciplines in the nineteenth century alongside flourishing theosophical and spiritualist movements, and shared the latter's fascination with magical knowledge and the spirits of the dead." In short, there is an "occult side of the human sciences" that has been forgotten or actively repressed but has never really gone away.[60]

2. A Critical and Affirmative Futurism: We Can Do Both

In conjuring the superhumanities, I also intend something that does not yet exist. I intend to propose *a critical and affirmative futurism* in which the conventional deconstructions and social criticisms of the disciplines can be embraced and celebrated but also put into conversation with the new affirmations of consciousness that are coming out of the philosophy of mind, quantum physics, evolutionary biology, and the comparative study of mystical literature and paranormal phenomena.

I must stress and nuance the phrase "put into conversation." In the words of the Irish poet William Butler Yeats (with his own well-known occult interests), I may well want to "hold reality and justice in a single vision," but the fact that I want to do this does *not* mean that such an integration is obvious or that each realm cannot be pursued independently of the other.[61] The empirical-real and the political-moral certainly *have* been severed in our knowledge practices. The humanities now generally pursue the political or the moral, and the sciences now generally pur-

sue the empirically real. This, I believe, is a very serious mistake and is resulting in the quickening disregard for the humanities, whose practitioners appear to think that they can proceed with their moral projects with no committed investment in determining how these relate to what is really real.

Good luck with that.

If we are going to live someday in a world that is truly sustainable, it will be a world in which everything, *absolutely everything*, will be connected. The ethical will flow out of the ontological, and the ontological out of the ethical. Obviously, we are not there. I do not add "yet," because we are so far from that world that I sometimes doubt we will ever get there, that we *can* get there.

For now, then, my own thought stumbles through the "wild facts" of William James's radical empiricism and into the self-reliance of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Such a tentative or future-oriented optimism is all about experiencing the depths and radical freedom of the self, *however* weird the phenomenal world gets, and refusing all external authority or tradition that conflicts with what one sees, hears, and experiences. Here, the self can *never* be reduced to the text, the culture, the historical moment, a specific social morality, some secular or scientistic materialism, or anything else. The self, like consciousness itself, is prior, primordial, fundamental. This is what Harold Bloom called the "American swerve" or the "American sublime," "where tradition is denied its last particle of authority, and the voice that is great within us rises up." This is what Bloom called "Emerson's American Gnosis."[62]

Still, refusing all tradition and authority does not mean refusing to recognize the genealogy of one's own moral values. Even Emerson, after all, emerged from his own liberal Protestant surround in Boston and New England, just as virtually all of the humanist academy's present values around class, gender, sex, and race rely on earlier Protestant theological notions of the individual, the integrity of the human soul, and the much older Christian virtues of charity and justice. Indeed, it is not much of an exaggeration to observe that *every* disciplinary object of study in the traditional humanities (philosophy, history, literature, art, religion, and political authority) find their historical origins, and much of their development, in the history of European Christianity. Certainly, the deep origins of the modern self and Western liberalism lie here, in religion (in this case, Pauline and Christian theology), not in secularism, as is commonly assumed.[63]

But—and here is my more original point—an author like Emerson was himself *also* a superhumanist writer. He was not just writing essays out of

his Christian surround and its earlier moral convictions. He was writing essays *out of his own gnostic experience of the real that sought to extend and radicalize this moral surround*. As he relates what is likely his own personal experience in his most famous essay, *Nature* (1836), he had "become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God."[64]

I do not think Emerson was exaggerating. I think he had actually realized such a transcendent state. He really knew himself as a "part or particle of God."

The humanities cannot acknowledge that originary moment, much less its Platonic punch, with its implicit message that there really is no final difference between the person and God. We cannot bear the thought that Plato and Plotinus might still well be plausible answers to the unity of the moral and the metaphysical, with ultimate reality really and truly known as the Good and the Beautiful and all things flowing directly, emanating, from that unitary Source at ever-increasing distances, which, admittedly, feel increasingly tragic the farther we get from the One.

Alas, we can no longer recognize such a Plato in the academy that bears in its very name the sacred olive grove in which he once taught. These were the original superhumanities, with reason and dialectic in conversation with contemplative experience and the secret rituals of the Mysteries, all designed to teach esoteric wisdom and knowledge of the self and so get us out of the cave of the senses, society, and mere opinion.[65]

We now know almost nothing of such a Plato, of course. Instead, we have created what Gregory Shaw has called "a fiction, a caricature, a venerable man of straw." Such a philosopher that is now "disparaged by postmodern critics as the architect of metaphysical dualism" is simply not the enlightened seer recognized by antiquity, be it Greek or Christian. The postmodern Plato is "an invention of our own habits of thought, and the dualism we attribute to him reflects our own existential estrangement from the divinity of the world."[66]

But the superhumanities will do no such thing. They locate the deepest source of Emerson's genius precisely *here* in that transparent all-seeing, that ascending self that is a part or particle of God and answerable to no authority or tradition *precisely because of that prior unity*.

To put things differently, we have never been fully disenchanted, and we never will be, and for one simple reason: *we are that enchantment*. Or, to put it differently again, consciousness as such *is* enchantment, *is* that universal "transparent eye-ball" that Ralph Waldo Emerson had fully known for a moment, and then wrote out of for a lifetime. You can no more elim-

inate this conscious enchantment or all-seeing eye than you can eliminate yourself.

I suppose you can try to do that, but that is what we call suicide.

3. A "Transcendent" Logic of Comparison: Combination and Collage from Above

By the superhumanities, I also mean to point to *a "transcendent" logic of comparison, combination, and collage*. Such a logic, which spiritually hovers over and above any and all local cultural forms and expressions, freely mixes and matches local historical forms within a spiritual art form that employs the specific parts, not as independent things, identities, or essences that must always be respected and preserved but as artistic elements toward the creation of a larger vision or whole, which itself is never complete, never final, always in process. This book is just such a comparative collage or spiritual art form, as is the history of religions as a discipline, as, I would argue, are the humanities as a whole.

Just such a transcendent logic of comparison is described earlier, with the Hermetic revelation in ancient Egypt and the robust eclecticisms of the ancient Mediterranean world. A similar combinative religion has been historically traced and subtly theorized in the American context by historians of religions such as Catherine Albanese and Leigh Eric Schmidt.[67] Indeed, this combinative practice is often identified as *the* defining pluralist feature of religion in America, something akin to Harold Bloom's American gnosis that is answerable to no tradition or authority.

Fair enough, but this is how religion and human cognition have always worked, in India, in China, in Europe, in Latin America, really anywhere we want to look closely and honestly enough. Postmodern dogmas aside, *nowhere* is the self really bound. Hence Nietzsche's notion of the "sovereign self" or the "free spirit," who is bound to no custom, culture, or philosophy and so can freely draw on any and all for his or her own creative and original purposes. Or Nietzsche's own self-characterization after Emerson's "transparent eye-ball." Nietzsche had also become a "pure, contemplative, impartial eye."[68]

Unfortunately, the same transcendental logic or spiritual sovereignty has been endlessly criticized and morally condemned in the last few decades as "colonizing," as "appropriation," as "cafeteria-style spirituality," and as "New Age" by various modern and postmodern voices. What is so significant here is that these criticisms are a direct function of what is

being assumed: a strictly materialist and exclusively social model of the human being that recognizes *no* spiritual or transcendent dimensions.

Allow me to return to my chessboard metaphor. As long as you stick to the flat chess board, you are in a zero-sum game. If the white players win, the black players lose. If the black players win, the white players lose. The whole thing is set up for an either-or outcome. But what if one moves up into a third dimension and ceases to identify with the pieces of either side on the two-dimensional chessboard? What if one recognizes the game *as a game* and just walks away?

The "appropriation" criticisms, in short, work only on the immanent social level on the chessboard and so understand individuals and cultures as essences or identities that cannot be broached, much less freely borrowed, mixed, and matched into spiritual collages within a transcendent logic. The chess piece has to remain the piece. The critiques stay entirely within the game and on the board. Such methods know *no* transcendence, and so *no* space outside or over the game. They only recognize the flat game. Strikingly, but hardly accidentally, fundamentalist ideologues seeking to preserve the illusory walls of their own religious nationalisms and ethnic identities (on the chessboard again) often employ the exact same materialist and postmodern critical methods.

What is so important to counter-observe in this context is that our humanist disciplines as a whole do not work with the same logic at all. They *assume* a transcendent logic, even when they serially focus exclusively on local cultural forms or identities or deny such a transcendent logic altogether. That is why a department of history, religion, philosophy, anthropology, or art history can look at *any* human cultural expression at *any* time and claim to understand something of its expressions. Clearly, a transcendent logic is implied in the very construction and practice of our disciplines and departments. We might be focused on this or that as individuals, but as communities we will look at anything. As a community, then, we are Emerson's all-seeing eye-ball or Nietzsche's pure, contemplative, impartial eye. We are after V.Y. Mudimbe's gnostic dream of an "absolute discourse."

We can challenge and question any of these specific spiritual collages, of course. Once we move above the chessboard, few of these specific belief systems will make much universal sense. But what does make sense is that human beings are always and everywhere moving up and off the board. Humans have been comparing, combining, and constructing such art forms as far as we can see back, and anywhere we can see back. This "comparative mystics" finally cannot be reduced to or explained by recent

political history or specific socioeconomic groups. Some of us have *always* been New Age.

4. A New Order of Knowledge: The Empirical-Imaginal

By my repeated invocation of the superhumanities, I further mean to encode *a radical new order of knowledge of an empirical-imaginal nature*. Such an order moves beyond, outside, or to the side of the present distinctions or splittings between the humanities and the sciences, between the subjective and the objective, between the mental and the material, between the transcendent and the immanent, to something deeper that grounds, founds, and expresses them both.[69] Such experiences are not examples of some simplistic pseudo-science to be whisked away. Quite the opposite, they are entry points into the real itself, a "passport to the cosmos," as the Harvard psychiatrist John Mack had it just right.[70]

Here, I highlight especially the altered states that lie at the core of the textual practices that have focused and expressed the humanities. Such altered states of consciousness, I will argue, sometimes grant us real access to cosmological truth, to the very structures of space, time, causality, matter, and consciousness (the human body-brain is the ultimate cosmic instrument), if *always* through the prism of the human imagination and the specificities of embodiment, language, and history (the instrument of the human body-brain is always focused *and* delimited by local culture).

This, by the way, is why I used scare quotes around the adjective *transcendent* earlier, in "a 'transcendent' logic of comparison, combination, and collage." Within the dual-aspect monism or nondual ontology out of which I am working and theorizing here, there are no such final referents as *transcendent* or *immanent* (SB 197–200). Both words are relative to a brain-in-a-body and a subject-in-a-society that splits the world in two.

We do not know what this order of knowledge is, and we *cannot* know only with and as these body-brains. Those body-brains, after all, are precisely what split the One World into two in our human experience in the first place. We can hardly restrict ourselves to the splitter to stop the splitting. The chess pieces will not question the chess game.

This is why it is so important to acknowledge and think with phenomena that transcend these body-brains and also transcend the usual dualisms of the mental and the material. We have to home in on *experiences* that are also *events*, that is, mental states that bear clear and undeniable correspondences with material events in the external environment, phenomena such as precognitive dreams (mental states that correspond to future

external events). There is no way to accept, much less make sense of, such events within our usual models of mind and matter. They make immediate sense, however, within this new empirical-imaginal order of knowledge I am proposing. This is how the impossible becomes the possible.

I am perfectly aware that most readers will associate the word *imaginal* with the historian of Islamic mysticism Henry Corbin, who used it extensively to describe the *mundus imaginalis*, or intermediate "imaginal world" of dream, vision, angelic visitation, resurrection, and (seldom discussed) the paranormal abilities of the saints, such as mind reading, materialization, and teleportation. What is not generally recognized is that Corbin did not invent or originate the term. It possesses important earlier histories in the French and English psychiatric and psychical research traditions, particularly in the thought of the British classicist Frederic Myers (1843–1901), who used the word in an evolutionary register and in relationship to his notion of a "subliminal self" to refer to psychical abilities like telepathy or precognition as evolutionary buds of newly emerging human faculties (SB 233–38).

Myers was thinking of biology, and specifically entomology, where the adjective *imaginal* refers to the adult imago or imaginal form of the insect that lies in potential in its larval form: the hard-winged butterfly that will eventually emerge from the squishy caterpillar. He also often used another *super-* word for the same evolutive sense: *supernormal*.

Myers's friend William James wrote of Myers's Human as Two as his "general conception of a subliminal life belonging to human nature in general, and having its own indefinitely wide environment, distinct from that with which our bodily senses carry on their commerce": "The normal consciousness is thus only a portion of our nature, adapted primarily to 'terrene' conditions. Those more directly intuitive faculties which it lacks, and of which we get glimpses in individuals whose subliminal lies exceptionally open, can hardly be vestiges, degenerations of something which our ancestors once possessed. We should rather regard them as germs of something not yet evolved for methodical use in our natural environment, but possibly even now carrying on a set of active functions in their own wider 'cosmic' environment."[71] It was Myers's evolving germ-like *supernormal* that was behind the slightly later French *paranormal*—a word that, once adopted into English, would become linguistically dominant with the evolutionary dimension now only vaguely known but erupting nonetheless in countless science fiction and popular forms.

In any case, it is precisely this same biological and evolutionary background, with our present larval humanities evolving into our imaginal

superhumanities, that I also intend whenever I use the word *imaginal* or *empirical-imaginal*. I am thinking of munching worms that will someday fly.

5. The Evolution of Consciousness Coded in Culture

As the above discussion suggests, finally, and most speculatively, the superhumanities constitute *a coded expression and a disciplined practice, even a rare realization of the evolution of consciousness*.

This is a double claim, and a most serious if speculative one. It is not simply that the disciplines express or embody new forms of consciousness; they also are furthering practices and formations of these new structures of consciousness. They can even cause or catalyze such states in future ready readers. Such practices and disciplines explore, reject, affirm, alter, and cultivate the structures of their own expressions and natures, like an organism exploring a new physical environment and adapting to its new terrain and features, constantly acting back on itself, changing itself, coming to know itself through itself. In a word, they are *reflexive*—bringing into existence that which they are about.[72]

I beg the reader not to misconstrue any such evolution of consciousness in happy, easy, or universal ways. What I am trying to name is exceptionally rare work, as it demands the courage to step out of one's own received culture, thoughts, and beliefs and move past them, beyond them, stand *above* them.

It also requires one *to step out of one's senses*. I have learned a great deal from the neuroscientist of perception Donald Hoffman and his "case against reality."[73] Hoffman argues that, if Darwinian evolution or natural selection is correct, there is virtually *no* chance that what we are perceiving with our senses as an external world filled with objects is the actual case or nature of things. Hence the subtitle to his book: *Why Evolution Hid the Truth from Our Eyes*.

For Hoffman, all of our sensory perceptions can only constitute a kind of internal computer desktop or virtual reality interface that our brains are creating to allow us to move through whatever is out there and manipulate reality's deeper software and hardware, which we never see, which we do not *need* to see and so *cannot* see. To extend the modern metaphor, if a gamer were concerned about the actual software behind the elaborate drama playing out on the screen, and if such a player paid close attention to that, the gamer would lose the game every time. As Hoffman crystallizes the matter in one of his many catchy sound-bites, "Fitness Beats Truth,"

that is, our sensory capacities have evolved to allow us to survive and reproduce, to win the game, as it were, *not* to tell us what is. This is why evolution has hid the truth from our eyes.

Hoffman clearly recognizes that, although the evolutionary framework for understanding our actual situation is very recent and very modern, this negative case or suspicion about the fundamental inadequacy of sense perception and cognition is hardly a new idea. He in fact invokes the allegory of Plato's cave and mentions different mystical traditions as obvious precedents for his thinking—in short, the superhumanities. Hoffman also, by the way, engages with respect and genuine interest colleagues who have claimed to access, to *know*, the nature of consciousness outside the sensory computer game.

I want to stress and emphasize, and then underline, this "case against reality," this leaving behind almost everything that we think we know and sense about the world and ourselves. The invocation of evolution here, then, hardly signals some happy advance for everyone. Quite the opposite, it implies, demands an honest esotericism. After searching authors like Hoffman, words like *evolution* imply, demand the mutant rarity of any such realization, of coming to know consciousness as such behind the virtual reality goggles of our senses. Plato and a thousand mystical authors around the globe knew something of the same secret, of course, but they lacked the advances of evolutionary biology and neuroscience. They lacked these new realities.

Still, these premodern authors can teach us a great deal. They knew what we generally do not. Accordingly, I will sometimes use the word *Hermetic* for this precious ability and its loopy or circular self-creating structure, since this is how this fifth feature of the superhumanities is encoded in some of the scholarship, from Wouter Hanegraaff's study of Hermetic spirituality summarized above to Glenn Alexander Magee's study of the Hermetic structure of Hegel's thought.

Magee's use of the word points to all the uncanny ways that Hegel's writings appear to point back to some direct mystical knowing or gnosis that lies at the ancient Greco-Roman Egyptian roots of the West's countertradition. He is thinking of texts such as the *Corpus Hermeticum* discussed above and later traditions and figures like medieval German mysticism, alchemy, Kabbalah, Jacob Boehme, Renaissance occultism, Bruno, Paracelsus, Agrippa, Rosicrucianism, German speculative pietism, and German Romanticism—all aspects of Western intellectual history that have been religiously condemned (mostly from a Protestant and rationalist perspec-

tive) or just politely ignored (in our modern secular world) for the last five centuries.[74]

Magee isolates a single theological idea as the key to Hermetic thought, a "middle position" between theism and pantheism that he summarizes in this way: "Hermeticism is a middle position because it affirms both God's transcendence of the world and his involvement in it. God is metaphysically distinct from the world, yet God needs the world [and especially the human] to complete himself." The latter doctrine of the circular relationship between God and world is what makes the Hermetic position "utterly original" for Magee and what sets it apart from systems like Neoplatonism (in which the One is unaffected by human contemplation) and ancient Gnosticism (in which the physical world was often demeaned and denied).[75]

Such a Hermetic panentheism in turn is rooted in a certain evolutionary impulse, which goes back to the familiar figure of Jacob Boehme: "This is the core of Böhme's Hermeticism: the conception of God not as transcendent and static, existing 'outside' the world, impassive and complete, but as an active *process* unfolding within the world, within history."[76] As David Walsh puts it succinctly: "Böhme is the herald of the self-actualizing evolutionary God."[77] But, and here is the Hermetic punch, such an evolutionary God needs to other itself to know itself. Such a God needs a human knower to self-actualize.

As mentioned above, this fifth and final feature of the superhumanities can also correctly be described as esoteric, by which, again, I do *not* mean something banal and simple, as if someone is holding something back, as if there is some kind of knowable secret that is being withheld for a select social few—something I could whisper to you, if I wanted to do so.

No. When I call this or any other form of knowledge esoteric (for example, Nietzsche's evolutionary vision of the *Übermensch*), I mean to signal that these paradoxical or circular types of direct knowledge—these knowings of us that change us—are scarce and special. It is not that everyone could know a secret that has not yet been told but could be. It is rather that almost everyone *cannot* know such a secret, because it *cannot* be told, not in any grammatical language or sensory structure anyway. It is literally ineffable, unspeakable, unthinkable, non-sensible. But it *can* be imagined symbolically in dream, vision, art, story, poetry, and myth, and often is. It *can* be known.

Such an understanding of the esoteric is not some arrogant position uttered from a stance of moral or spiritual superiority. Quite the oppo-

site, it is an honest and unwelcome conclusion after a lifetime of watching these very forms of knowledge get mangled, misrepresented, and misunderstood by everyone from fundamentalists to physicists. After three decades of being disappointed over and over again, what else am I supposed to conclude?

This is also my experience of teaching in the classroom. Not everyone can understand, can step out of their deepest held beliefs and ideologies, can come to understand the most basic insights of the fierce humanities: that *everything* we think or believe is in fact historically conditioned and socially constructed; that there are no stable essences of nation-state, religion, gender, sex, race, or any other kind of identity; that we are constantly interpreting ourselves into existence; and (perhaps the most difficult truth of all) that what we sense and think about the physical world is not what is actually there (Don Hoffman is right). Few, in actual fact, can come to know these truths. They are hard. In truth, they are *impossible*.

I understand perfectly well that any such ideas around advance or progress, much less such an acknowledged esotericism, are not well-received positions today and come with all sorts of challenges and undesirable pasts (including aristocratic, social Darwinist, racist, and colonial ones). But I also suspect that, not unlike the implicit but seldom owned transcendent logic of the humanities, most intellectuals actually secretly hold elite values of advance or progress in some form or other, despite their public protestations to the contrary.

Many, if not most, certainly do on a moral level, even and especially those who would warn us, correctly, about the social Darwinist, racist, and colonial past uses. These intellectuals believe that their moral values around class, race, and gender are better, that they know more than, say, their own families and public cultures. In terms of the moral logic of autonomy and individualism, they *do*, of course. Why else bother to pursue these particular forms of social analysis and moral knowledge? Why be an intellectual if it were not indeed possible to know more than one's ancestors or one's publics?

And this is before we get to the sciences. The sciences are the sciences precisely because they are constantly proving themselves wrong, in effect overcoming themselves. The sciences simply make no sense without this implicit or explicit conviction in progressing human knowledge. Contemporary scientists know more than their predecessors. *That's the whole point of doing science*. Again, if this were not so, then why bother?

Please stop the faux humility.

THE DIFFERENCE IT MAKES: A MODERN HINDU EXEMPLUM

Before we move on, I want to demonstrate how these ideas are extremely important for how we read specific historical texts and ethnographic examples in our scholarship; how, in effect, they make all the difference. I also want to be very clear about why the conventional postmodern, social, or identity-focused methods cannot work in any complete sense; how they do *not* make a difference (or make difference) in any full and robust way. I want to show why we must take the ontological and the universal very seriously—as potentially the actual case—in order to take the social and the local truly seriously. The moral logic of autonomy and individualism is simply not universal. Nor is the Western social self.

The South Asian and now transnational Hindu traditions, like all developed world religions, have been fantastically rich in reflections on our superhumanity. It is quite impossible—a fool's errand, really—to summarize or generalize about these vast currents. Moreover, one can always find particular figures or texts in the ocean of Hindu currents to support one's particular position on almost any matter, whatever that position or matter happens to be. I certainly do not want to make any arguments about any religious tradition as a whole. Such are millennia-long debates and conversations, not essences or singular positions. Indian philosophies, often organized into six fundamentally differing schools, are powerful examples of just this kind of pluralistic debate.[78]

Still, I think it is fair to say that one major difference between the Indian Hindu and, say, the European Christian traditions is, in the words of the contemporary historian of religions David Peter Lawrence, that the former Hindu currents often claim "that humans can fully possess divine self-recognition," whereas "the common Christian standpoint" is "that they may at the most participate in it only partially."[79] Put in terms of the present book, the Hindu esoteric traditions, taken as a whole, are simply more super than the Christian ones.

I think I know why. Much of this, I strongly suspect, is a result of the very different genealogies of the self in the European and Indian genealogies. The general comparative truth is that the human self is equated with embodiment in the European Christian tradition. Hence the necessity of the doctrine of resurrection.[80] European seers and intellectuals, indebted to the scriptural imaginations of the Bible, simply could not imagine a human being without a body.

But Asian seers and intellectuals have no trouble doing so. Indeed, the

elaborate systems of karma and reincarnation throughout Hindu, Buddhist, and Daoist Asia more or less demand that the human *not* be fully equated with any single embodiment or any particular social location. How else to explain the existence of *multiple* bodies, even multiple *species*, for the reincarnating human or transhuman core? Talk about posthuman. The social and historical influences abound, of course, and such constructive forces (understood as karma) move through many lives, not just one, and toward very specific goals that privilege the human form. Such worldviews are clear examples of human exceptionalism and a kind of spiritual evolutionism millennia before Darwin.

In some ways, then, the social constructions are much more radical and extensive in the Asian models than in the Western ones. And yet these Asian systems manifestly do not do what the Western critical theories do over and over again: equate the human with the socialized body. That is the difference that makes all the difference, and that is what makes them more super.

Consider the modern spiritual teacher Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897–1981). In the self-understanding of the tradition, this humble cigarette peddler was enlightened by his own spiritual teacher as a young man and subsequently taught in the nondual (*advaita*) tradition of Indian religion and philosophy. Late in life, in a simple flat in Mumbai, he taught visiting Indian and Western students in strikingly simple and frank terms that our hard-won humanist assumptions about identity and embodiment are simply mistaken forms of ignorance (*avidya*) and illusion (*maya*).

The teaching is *hard*. These nearly universal misperceptions about our assumed identity with the physical body and the social ego are cognitive and sensory misperceptions, *which are simply not true*. They evaporate before the direct manifestation of an eternal, deathless form of consciousness, being, and bliss that is our true ground and nature, what Nisargadatta called, following his tradition, the Self (*atman*).

This Self is *not* the social, ethnic, cultural, or religious ego of the social sciences and the humanities, much less the liberal subject with individual rights (there is no real or ultimate individual). Nor is it the self-interested economic actor of Adam Smith and modern capitalists. Nor is it the biological body of modern biomedicine, much less the socially constructed body and fluid set of desires of the race and gender theorists. It is so important to emphasize this double point: *the Human is Two* for Nisargadatta. There is, of course, an experience of ego, of you and me, but this will die and disappear before a much larger, cosmic Self that is none of us or, if you

prefer, all of us. In a single burning sentence, "Liberation is never of the person, it is always from the person."[81] Or even more bluntly, "Realization is of the fact that you are not a person."[82] "To be a person is to be asleep."[83]

Consider some more typical lines from Nisargadatta, which are hardly unique and which could be multiplied for pages with other words of his: "The way to truth lies through the destruction of the false. To destroy the false, you must question your most inveterate beliefs. Of these the idea that you are the body is the worst. With the body comes the world, with the world—God, who is supposed to have created the world and thus it starts—fears, religions, prayers, sacrifices, all sorts of systems—all to protect and support the child-man, frightened out of his wits by monsters of his own making." Religion as childish illusion. Freud could not have said it better. And did not.

Or consider these radical lines on the transnational, queer, and nonhuman nature of our real universal nature: "If you seek reality you must set yourself free of all backgrounds, of all cultures, of all patterns of thinking and feeling. Even the idea of being man or woman, or even human, should be discarded. The ocean of life contains all, not only humans. So, first of all abandon all self-identification, stop thinking of yourself as such-and-such, this or that." So what are we? We are something else or other entirely: "That which makes you think you are a human is not human. It is but a dimensionless point of consciousness, a conscious nothing; all you can say about yourself is: 'I am.' You are pure being-awareness-bliss. To realize that is the end of all seeking. You come to it when you see all you think yourself to be as mere imagination and stand aloof in pure awareness of the transient as transient, imaginary as imaginary, unreal as unreal."[84]

Once taken truly seriously, which is to say, as potentially true of *all* of us and not as just another relative cultural discourse or representation, such mystical teachings are a kind of acid bath in which to dissolve the present certainties of the humanities, which focus on *precisely* that which a teacher like Nisargadatta tells us we must get over, move beyond, and deny: the body, the gendered, the social, the religious, even the human itself.

Or better—and this is the proposal I advance in this book—the humanities, as presently conceived, could easily and well function as a potent practice of the very radical denials that Nisargadatta is calling for in such lines, if only—and this is a Big If—they could see themselves as preparatory and tentative and not as final or sufficient. We need more humility here. We are very, very good at demonstrating "the transient as transient, imaginary as imaginary, unreal as unreal." We are very, very bad at demonstrating anything beyond that, of affirming the being, awareness, and bliss

at our base. We are generally very bad at this for a simple reason: because we do not believe anything is there.

And, for Nisargadatta and his tradition, *nothing is there*. But this nothing is also, paradoxically, everything. It only takes a twist, a turn, or a flip. The deeper "I am," after all, exists *before* and *beyond* (super) all the personal, historical, psychological, sexual, gendered, racial, and economic conditionings that modern intellectuals consider important. They are important to us as social egos, of course, but they are not ultimately important for a spiritual teacher like Nisargadatta. They will pass. They will dissolve. So will *you*.

But, at least for this particular superhuman civilizational complex, the infinite nothing or presence behind the "I am" will not pass. It is absolutely universal, deathless, the same in everyone everywhere always. Actually, in this worldview, there really is only one underlying permanent Reality, and we are all temporary, embodied manifestations of It.

To invoke my present terms, we may think we are only human, but we are also superhuman, and not human at all. To put the matter in the most direct terms possible, what the present state of the humanities considers to be sacrosanct and most important (that is, the liberal politics of identity formation and social justice) such an Indian spiritual teacher would insist is that which is preventing us from understanding our true situation and, frankly, to be healed from our endless social and psychological suffering. We are focusing on and so strengthening *precisely* that which is the deepest and most radical problem. We are banging our heads against the very bars that are imprisoning us.

I take the guru very seriously. Which is to say: I take what he has to say in and as the text as potentially applicable to me as to him, to us as to them. Most of all, I read a teacher like Nisargadatta for what he can show us about the importance and limitation of the humanities and, more still, of their possible futures.

Without a realization that "the words 'outer' and 'inner' are relative to the body only; in reality all is one, the outer being merely a projection of the inner," we will continue to think we somehow exist inside a body.[85] We will also continue to do *the opposite*, that is, we will identify with this or that external projection, from the body itself, to the abstractions of humanity and God and all the words and identities that these endlessly generate. To put things differently, the conceptual and cultural walls we built around ourselves are not really there. There is no inside or outside. There are in fact no walls. But until you see and understand this in a direct and immediate way, you are trapped inside, *by yourself*.

And the trap? It is the little "I am," or what we call the ego or social self. *It is the very human subjectivity or constructed identity that the humanities take as their present sole object of study and so reproduce endlessly*. If I may translate Nisargadatta for my own purposes here, by focusing exclusively on the social self or identity, the humanities further strengthen the prison bars:

> You have put so much energy into building a prison for yourself. Now spend as much on demolishing it. In fact demolition is easy, for the false dissolves when it is discovered. All hangs on the idea "I am." Examine it very thoroughly. It lies at the root of every trouble. It is a sort of skin that separates you from the reality. The real is both within and without the skin, but the skin itself is not real. This "I am" idea was not born with you. You could have lived very well without it. It came later due to your self-identification with the body.[86]

And it gets worse. Or better, as in, it gets downright empirical. Space and time for the guru are not what they appear to be. They are functions of this (false) identification with the body. In reality, we are not in space or time. *Space and time are in us*. We are in fact infinite and eternal.[87] The guru even claimed to be everywhere all at once, beyond space and time altogether.[88] In this same current of superhuman teaching, Nisargadatta seems to invoke the very modern concept of hyperdimensionality: "There are no steps to self-realization. There is nothing gradual about it. It happens suddenly and is irreversible. You rotate into a new dimension, seen from which the previous ones are mere abstractions."[89]

I engage such a figure here not to sign my name to his lines but rather to show just how "colonized" the humanities still are by our European traditions and assumptions and how they will remain so until they can question their own most basic values about the absolute importance of identity, embodiment, and social life. We can and should affirm, even celebrate, the most basic impulses of the humanities, especially their tendency to deconstruct and deny and their reluctance to construct and affirm. As Nisargadatta wrote: "Assertions are usually wrong and denials—right. . . . Assertion is bondage. To question and deny is necessary. It is the essence of revolt and without revolt there can be no freedom." Or, "You are nothing perceivable or conceivable." This is why "you literally progress by rejection—a veritable rocket."

But—and here is where the guru differs radically with the conventional humanities—there is an affirmation on the other side of the denials and deconstructions: "'Nothing is me', is the first step. 'Everything is me' is

the next. Both hang on the idea: 'there is a world.' When this too is given up, you remain what you are—the non-dual Self."[90] To put the matter differently again, the humanities are all about the mind and its uses. This is good, as long as we can use this as a preparation and not a destiny, as long as we can use the mind to go beyond the mind, like a rocket (more legitimate science fiction).

THE QUESTION THAT CANNOT BE ASKED

Finally, a good long look at a figure like Nisargadatta raises a particular suspicion in me that very much relates to what I am calling the superhumanities. I strongly suspect that the academy's overriding moral concern with difference and its near complete disinterest in ontological identity is very Christian or Jewish, or, perhaps better, theistic. There is a deep theological program running behind the screen here, one that insists that human difference is fundamental and not illusory; that the Creator is separate from the creation (or does not exist at all); that every soul or person is distinct and special in some fundamental moral sense; and that the human being or self should be equated, full stop, with embodiment. *All* these claims, it turns out, are local theological ones. They constitute a cultural reality posit that should be taken seriously but hardly absolutely.

All one has to do to begin to realize just how local these assumptions are is to consider the ultimate blind spot of the conventional humanities: their absolute refusal to consider any human existence beyond physical death. There are nearly 8 billion people on the planet as I write these lines. *Every single one of them will die*. Death is universal. It is a physical fact that is not culturally or historically relative. And yet we cannot ask the obvious question about what happens to us—*every single one of us*—after we die. Do we all die in the same way? Do we die into a great nothing or blank? Or do we, in effect, die into our imaginations, experiencing, at least for a time, different postmortem and socially constructed realities? Or are there stages of the death process that move through different cultural reality deposits but then move beyond these into some kind of shared cosmic universality?

We do not know, of course, partly because we have not asked the question in any truly robust, truly comparative, and truly systematic way.

Why?

I think the answer is obvious. Such a question is completely out of bounds, because, to consider it fairly and deeply (which would mean to consider the full global witness of just such afterlives, including the extensive data of small children who remember previous lives in different

bodies around the planet) would threaten the very metaphysical (or anti-metaphysical) foundations of the Western academy. After all, we would be faced with the very real possibility that the human is *not* finally the embodied social self, a possibility to which every physical death and decay give a most dramatic and suggestive affirmative nod. What we now call psi or paranormal experiences would also suddenly become not only possible but plausible, since so many of these experiences appear to work like signals or communications between forms of consciousness that are not entirely delimited by a local body or brain. Suddenly, the human organism would look like a transmission station and not a production factory.

Such a human existence beyond the social carbon, of course, is completely impossible in our present intellectual framework. It sounds like science fiction.

That's because it is.

Legitimate science fiction.

2 "THE TRUTH MUST BE DEPRESSING"

Immunological Responses of the Intellectual Body

> Should he admit the probability of even one of these stories? How important would such an avowal be, and what astonishing implications could one foresee, if even only *one* such occurrence could be supposed to be proven. There is perhaps a third position left, namely, not to meddle with such prying and *idle* questions, but to concern oneself only with what is *useful*.
>
> IMMANUEL KANT, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*

> All nay-saying is the province of impoverished people.
>
> FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *Unpublished Fragments*

> Do not judge, or you too will be judged.
>
> MATTHEW 7:1

We are already super, then. The history of religions shows us that. And we have long been human. The history of higher education and humanism shows us that, as does any fair history of any sustainable culture or community. If this is the double case, however, one would expect to see irruptions of the super fairly regularly, even in moments that are allegedly focusing only on the human and that have tried their best to suppress the super.

This is, in fact, what we see. It is something I have noticed many times. The history of the humanities is absolutely *filled* with superhuman eccentricities and embarrassments. People will just not behave. Moreover, and more to my point, this same misbehaving history has rendered canonical historical texts that were in fact inspired by these very altered states of knowledge, sometimes of the most impossible kind (moments of deification, precognitive dreams, clairvoyance of physical landscapes, psychedelic revelations of reality, telepathic communications). And yet we systematically suppress this doubled fact, which repeats itself even and especially in figures who are credited with the supposed impossibility of these very subjective experiences and physical events.

Consider that supposed archetype of atheism and existential denial, the Algerian French writer Albert Camus. Camus, it turns out, worked in his youth on the synthesis of ancient Greek thought and Christian metaphysics in Gnosticism, Plotinus, and Augustine, with telling chapter titles like "Gnosis" and "Mystic Reason." Such an attempt to negotiate the human and the superhuman—*whatever* the answer—reverberated through his later famous novels and essays and their attempt to address, head-on, the nihilism and absurdity of modern life.[1] Indeed, Ioan Couliano has recognized in Camus's famous titles strong Gnostic dualistic echoes (particularly *The Stranger* and *The Fall*). And Lautaro Roig Lanzillota has reminded us that in mature works such as *The Rebel* (1951), Camus traced back what he hymned in the book as "metaphysical rebellion" or "metaphysical revolution" to the ancient wells of early Gnosticism and, more recently, to the "absolute affirmation" of Friedrich Nietzsche.[2]

Very much against the received grain again, Camus insisted that "the history of metaphysical rebellion cannot be confused with that of atheism."[3] He also wrote of himself in his *Notebooks* in ways that surprise: "Secret of my universe: imagine God without the immortality of the soul." Or: "I often read that I am atheistic; I hear people speak of my atheism. Yet these words say nothing to me; for me they have no meaning. I do not believe in God and I am not an atheist."[4] Not exactly the Albert Camus most assume.

In an even more contemporary context, it would be difficult to name two figures more influential on American deconstructive thought than Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. These two French intellectuals did more than anyone in the twentieth century to render it nearly impossible to talk about the super. But who discusses Derrida's late conversion to telepathy as the ultimate deconstruction of the supposed subject in the head? Who admits that he clearly knew that telepathy happens and confessed his own multiple experiences of it?[5] Who follows up on the implications of Foucault's acid trip in Death Valley in which, as one book has it, he claimed to know "the Truth"?[6] (We will do so in the next chapter.)

Camus's gnostic metaphysical rebellion, Derrida's telepathy, and Foucault's revealed Truth are just three moments in a long history of suppression, systemic denial, or just plain distraction (I am never quite sure). I am certainly not blaming any individuals with such an observation, but I am blaming the unconscious metaphysical structures in place that render this suppression predictable, common, and necessary. Actually, it is nearly automatic. Given those metaphysical assumptions, the systemic suppression makes perfect sense.

THE CONTAGION AND THE JOKE

Those metaphysical structures are remarkably simple. They all boil down to some form of historical materialism and an exclusive focus on the social: stick to the level of the chessboard, stay in Flatland, only talk about the black and white pieces on the chessboard and who is winning and losing in any particular moment. That is it. That is everything. That is certainly all that is truly important.

It is as if the intellectual body—by which I mean the entire social body of the academy produced and maintained by everything from the reading of specific authors and ideas to PhD admission criteria and hiring and tenure practices—possesses a robust immunological response to what the American Christian poet Peter O'Leary has called the "gnostic contagion"—the way in which specific poets and writers tend to "infect" one another over the generations with a direct and immediate knowledge of that about which they are writing and which is *not* on the academic chessboard.[7]

The language of contagion, of course, means something more today. It troubles. But the metaphor of a gnostic contagion recognizes the pathologization of that of which it wishes to speak, even as it recognizes this pathologization finally to deny it. And it ultimately takes up the perspective of the so-called contagion itself, that is, of an actual transmissive gnosis.

These immunological responses to what we perceive to be a contagion (it is, in fact, another dimension of us) can take on any number of expressions and forms, but they all come down to the same basic immunological response: ignore the super, downplay it whenever it appears, erase it if you can, and, if you must talk or write about it, reduce it to something social, moral, and political. Do not allow the gaze of the reader to look up. Focus that gaze down, always down. Around is fine, too. But never, *ever* up.

One of my Rice colleagues, John Stroup, sometimes speaks of "the Machine" that eliminates one historical intellectual figure after another, mostly, it turns out, through charges of fascist associations or illicit sexual activity. I am not writing of this particular phenomenon (although I will touch on it in the next chapter), but an expression like "the Machine" speaks well to the power and automatic nature of the suppression that I discuss in this chapter.

The Machine works with some very particular and identifiable mechanisms of thought. It works with a very specific ontology (historical materialism) and anthropology (social life as ultimate), neither of which are really adequate to the human condition but nevertheless are mostly true, or at least half true. Unfortunately, to maintain the illusion of being entirely

true, they must erase entire swaths of human experience and conviction that lie at the core of human civilization. Here, in this chapter, I call out these unconscious (or conscious) ontological and social commitments—name them, explore them, question their adequacy.

And joke about them.

Indeed, the situation is so obvious to me by now that I have taken to telling a joke about it on the lecture circuit. It goes like this. Before audiences in both the United States and Europe, I claim that I have finally discovered the criterion of *all* forms of truth in the contemporary humanities. I then ask the audience if they want to hear what I have discovered. "It's epic," I tell them. They inevitably go along with the joke. (Hey, I have the podium. What else can they do?) So I tell them the secret: "There is one, and only one criterion of truth in the humanities these days, and it is this: the truth must be depressing."

They *always* laugh. They always laugh because (a) it is true, and they know it, and (b) this obvious truth is itself more than a little laughable, in a nervous, uncomfortable sort of way. I then gloss the joke. I explain how, if one says something critical, if one can reduce every truth claim, every experience of transcendence, every notion of a shared humanity, to some ideological move, some power grab, then one will be considered smart, a real intellectual. If, on the other hand, one actually has the audacity to suggest that humans everywhere and always actually do share something in common, or do commonly experience dimensions of reality outside of space and time—that is, outside of history—one will be mocked, quietly or vocally. If one does not already have a secure job, one will certainly not get one. Job or no job, one will also be called, privately or publicly, naive, New Age, or worse.

I know. I have been, many times.

The humor then slides into a kind of pathetic irony. I point out that, after we have spent decades rendering the truth depressing, we then wonder and worry why the humanities are being gradually, or quickly, sidelined in the public culture, why they are being defunded, or just ignored and allowed to wilt on the shriveling branch. But why be surprised? Why on earth should anyone support a project that basically argues that there is no truth; that all our claims to truth are nothing more than power grabs; that truth is really power (and always somehow bad power); and that the goal of the intellectual life is a kind of permanent and total depression?

Go back for a moment to my memories of children's television shows in the 1960s. A little girl stands up on the studio bleachers and asks you what a professor of the humanities does. (Don't ask me why you are standing

there. You just are). She is seriously considering such a dream and future life. You try to keep things simple, at a six-year-old's level.

"Oh, we take things apart. We show how what people believe about the world and themselves is false."

So she asks: "Do you ever put things back together? Do you show people what to believe? What is true and good?"

"Of course not. There is no such thing as truth or goodness."

"Oh."

The six-year-old wants to become a nurse now. Nurses, at least, do something good. They help people get better. Or maybe she will become a scientist. They certainly think things are true or not. She does not know yet that the secular scientific vision of things is equally depressing (we are nothing but dead matter organized in abstract mathematical ways heading nowhere), but at least scientists can make cool shiny stuff that distracts and dazzles for a while, or prevent us from getting deadly contagious diseases.

Humanists can do none of that. We mostly just complain and shame. We say "No." We have perfected the exquisite art of judgment and guilt. We call it "critique."

THE LIMITS OF CRITIQUE

When I was trained in graduate school at the University of Chicago in the 1980s, we were required to read Paul Ricoeur's *Freud and Philosophy*. It is a big book. It is also a beautiful book. The French philosopher spends hundreds of pages demonstrating in exquisite detail just how sophisticated Freud's thought and methods really are, even more so than the psychoanalyst himself could have realized. Ricoeur's discussion of Freud's dual hermeneutics of energy and meaning, of bodily power and cultural formation I personally consider unsurpassed to this day—a powerful collapse of the empirical and the imaginal.

But that is not why the book is most remembered today (when it is remembered at all), or at least why I remember it. What I most remember is how the philosopher helped readers think about the complexities and nuances of hermeneutics (the art of interpreting texts, works of art, and human experience) in two basic forms: the "hermeneutics of suspicion" and the "hermeneutics of trust."

The hermeneutics of suspicion, which, as already noted, Ricoeur identifies with the legacies of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, takes the text of the book, artwork, or experience and reduces it to something other than what

it claims to be. The text is never innocent (and never quite good). It must always be translated into some other code, be it an economic, historical, or psychosexual one.

The hermeneutics of trust, on the other hand, takes the text not literally, as the believer might, but as expressive of some experience or encounter with an actual reality, however culturally coded that expression might be. Translation here is not about reducing the text or experience of the other to one's own understanding. It is about allowing the other to speak to one's own assumptions and potentially change them through what it reveals about the real in and through the art of interpretation. Interpretation is not about reduction. It is about transformation.

There is a rather simple way of distinguishing between the two forms of interpretation in practice. One can be certain that one is practicing a hermeneutics of suspicion when one concludes that one does not want to be a part of the text or tradition one is interpreting; when one concludes that the text or tradition being studied is engaging in subterfuge, deception, or bad politics. On the other hand, one can safely conclude that one is practicing a hermeneutics of trust when one concludes that one would very much like to know what the text or tradition knows; that there is something especially positive, even fantastic, to be drawn out and known from the text or tradition. One may or may not want to be an official part of the text or tradition, but one certainly wants to know, wants to become something of *that*.

It is important to observe that Ricoeur was not arguing that we should avoid the hermeneutics of trust and only engage in the hermeneutics of suspicion, or vice versa. Nor am I. His immense and obviously appreciative book was all about Sigmund Freud, after all (as was much of my own life and work). Ricoeur *adored* these figures to whom he gave the honorary title "masters of suspicion." He clearly thought that their methods were powerful, accurate, and just.

Which is not to say adequate. Accordingly, Ricoeur effectively called on readers to travel through what he called the "desert of criticism" until one could arrive at a "second naivete." This was his language for a place of interpretation that had taken in all the suspicions and reductions of the masters but could also listen anew to what the text, art form, or person was revealing that is positive and true. He was calling for a *both-and*.

That is not what happened. Over the next few decades, through the 1980s, 1990s, and into the new millennium, the various hermeneutics of trust were pretty much wiped off the academic map as the various hermeneutics of suspicion took over and came to dominate the departments and

so the discussions (ironically, the hermeneutics of suspicion were allegedly suspicious of takeovers and discursive dominance). The situation has been smartly described by the feminist literary critic Rita Felski in her punchy and powerful *The Limits of Critique*. Felski attempts to re-right the very same imbalance and address this fundamental going awry in the humanities.

Felski writes against the near total dominance of disenchantment, deconstruction, and denial, much as I am doing here in a different key. Accordingly, she writes of the "limits of critique" and proposes a new, really Ricoeurian, model of the *postcritical*—that is, a way of reading texts and histories that understands and embraces the social critics and their various hermeneutics of suspicion (Marxist, psychoanalytic, feminist, postcolonial, and queer) but does not stop there in that particular mood of militancy. Her model also moves on to what is most positive, most meaningful, even fundamentally optimistic. Here is how she puts it in some typical lines of the book: "And yet there are other salient desires, motives, agendas that drive acts of reading and that receive short shrift from critics scouring works of literature for every last crumb of real or imagined resistance. *We shortchange the significance of art by focusing on the 'de' prefix (its power to demystify, destabilize, denaturalize) at the expense of the 're' prefix: its ability to recontextualize, reconfigure, or recharge perception.* Works of art do not only subvert but also convert; they do not only inform but also transform."[8] Note the religious allusions of her argument.

Felski recognizes that critique is limited (it cannot do everything); that it relies on a set of rhetorical and metaphysical strategies that are not themselves beyond critique; that such critique is in fact quite Western and does not always sit well with non-Western or queer experience (especially ecstatic religious experience, I would add); and that, as such, pure critique erases or renders invisible other important, maybe key, aspects of meaning and possibility. Like Ricoeur, Felski obviously admires critical theorists. Indeed, she wrote an earlier appreciative book on how feminist insights have fundamentally, and positively, changed how we read literature.[9] But, again, such methods have *limits*. They are pragmatic tools in our toolbox that can be pulled out (or not) for a particular job, not absolute truths to which we must submit as dogmatic and exclusive believers. These are tools. They should not become jealous gods.

Felski identifies five qualities of critique. I list them here in her exact words, followed by my own glosses and life experiences in the academy.

1. "Critique is secondary." This is another way of saying that critique is always parasitic, always relies on a text or tradition, which it needs to survive and

flourish. It is always a critique of something else. It can never stand alone for itself. What is so odd here is that critique commonly refuses to acknowledge this secondary, or what Felski calls this "subservient," status. It insists rather on its own ultimate authority and independence, even though it possesses none.

2. "Critique is negative." Critique can never form positive statements or construct optimistic visions, much less arrive at positive conclusions. Something is always wrong, and usually very wrong.
3. "Critique is intellectual." Critique is technical and often jargon-filled. It almost always requires extensive training to be understood at all, much less practiced and extended. Critique is what Felski calls a "professional suspicion." People who are not extensively socialized into these particular language games (that is, people without a PhD in this or that critical theory) generally have little or no idea about what the nuances of the theories and their technical vocabularies mean or how they are best used.
4. "Critique comes from below." Despite the obvious elitism of critique and the years of advanced study that are required to master any such theory, the judgments of critique are never rhetorically advanced as such, that is, as elite. They always position themselves as fighting from below, for the underdog, as it were.
5. "Critique does not tolerate rivals." This is probably one of the strongest and clearest qualities of critique in my own experience. The way I have put this in my own mind and thought is that critique, unlike the Ricoeurian hermeneutical tradition in which I was trained, is *never* symmetrical, *never* inclusive. It is *always* asymmetrical and exclusive. Whereas I have striven endlessly to include Freudian, feminist, queer, postcolonial, and ecocritical perspectives in my academic toolbox as important truths, the strong message I have gotten from my academic peers is that my own interests in transcendence, in sameness, and in the sui generis nature of consciousness are not allowed. In short, whereas I include their interests, questions, and methods in my own (and intensely suffered for this for years in very public, even international, ways), they will not include mine in their own. The situation is entirely asymmetrical.

Regarding this basic asymmetry between hermeneutics and critique, I have found much insight in the work of the British psychiatrist and literary scholar Iain McGilchrist, whose *The Master and His Emissary* I consider simply luminous. McGilchrist ranges through centuries of Western art and literature, always with an eye on brain function and the very different ways that the left and right hemispheres create art, literature, and knowledge.

Although human brain function is always "global"—that is, integrative

of both neurological systems in the shared skull—the two brains do in fact function differently and result in very different cultural values and cognitive styles; we really are *two*. Whereas the left hemisphere of the human brain focuses on explanation, cause, analysis, reduction, detail, context, specificity, and number, the right hemisphere privileges understanding, meaning, holism, narrative, comparison, a profound sense of otherness, and metaphor.

McGilchrist argues that Western culture has seen over the last few centuries a growing, and dangerous, dominance of the left hemisphere over the right. And this despite the fact that it is really the right hemisphere that is the true "master," with the left hemisphere very much an "emissary" that serves all kinds of important and useful functions but will not and literally *cannot* speak for the whole. Hence his title from a parable that Nietzsche told about an emissary that worked for a benevolent king. The emissary was sent out to manage part of the kingdom for the wise monarch but soon decided to pretend that he himself was the king. You can see where that one is going.

Most significantly for our present purposes is McGilchrist's observations on the asymmetrical functioning of the two hemispheres: that the right hemisphere is *inclusive* in its intellectual style, whereas the left hemisphere is *exclusive*. Whereas the right hemisphere "can also use the left hemisphere's preferred style," "the left hemisphere cannot use the right hemisphere's."[10] Hence the master and the emissary.

This, of course, explains nearly perfectly the differences between Ricoeur's generous double hermeneutics of suspicion and trust (which integrates and celebrates both cognitive styles) and the jealous gods of contemporary critique (which will tolerate only the left hemisphere's reason, reduction, suspicion, and analysis). It also explains my experience of the academy. What we are dealing with here are real neuroanatomical functions and a genuine dominance of the left-brained functions over the right-brained functions of the doubled human being.

I am well aware, of course, of how people want to reject this whole dual-hemisphere hermeneutic. I am always astonished by how quickly models that make so much sense to so many are so quickly rejected by others. So speaks the left hemisphere. Such is how the truth becomes depressing. It's a left-brain thing. It is *not* a right-brain thing. Similarly, the humanities in many of its most contemporary voices may well insist on excluding what I am calling the superhumanities, but the superhumanities will insist on including the humanities; the superhumanities will in fact rely on the humanities for their own prophetic voices.

And why not? Regardless of what the left brain wants to claim, we are *always* both. And so Felski concludes her discussion of the five qualities with a constructive way forward through and beyond the present language games of critique:

> Refusing to participate in this language game would make room for a richer variety of affective as well as intellectual orientations; it would allow us to be surprised by what our colleagues have to say; it would encourage us to pose different questions as well as discover unexpected answers. And here, as Richard Rorty points out, the best way of redirecting an established line of thought is not to take up arms against it (via the technique of "critique") but to come up with inspiring alternatives and new vocabularies. What if we refused to be rail-roaded into the false choice between the critical and uncritical? How might argument and interpretation proceed if critique were no longer our ubiquitous watchword and ever-vigilant watchdog? What other shapes of thought could we imagine? And how else might we venture to read, if we were not ordained to read suspiciously?[11]

The present book is one colleague's eccentric answer to these keen questions. This chapter is more concerned with a smaller but also important question: How has this overriding suspicion worked in practice? How do the perfectly just suspicions of the critics overcome any and all forms of trust in the texts? How does the emissary of the left brain pretend it is the master of the whole kingdom? Allow me just two iconic examples from the history of the humanities as a means to get at an answer.[12] Before I turn to the radical diversification of the humanities in chapter 3 and especially in chapter 4, let us first see how even the white male history of the humanities is stranger than we thought, how elite white men can also be impossible.

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE: "6,000 FEET ABOVE MAN AND TIME"

In the late summer of 1881, a perpetually ill but especially intense former, or just failed, academic would have a life-changing mystical experience at a large rock beside a lake near the Swiss town of Sils Maria. As it turned out, this strange man would do more than anyone else to bestow the word *superhuman* on our cultural present.

Enter the inimitable Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900).

Like Kant, Marx, and Freud, Nietzsche has become a single name, a kind of legend who lives in the culture mostly through black-and-white

photographs of his immense handlebar mustache or cultural memes like, "Whatever does not kill you makes you stronger." Yeah, he wrote that, at least twice actually, and within a few months of each other in 1888: in *Twilight of the Idols* and *Ecce Homo*.

Much more substantively than mustaches and memes, Nietzsche is also a complex web of ideas in whose sticky weave much of elite academic culture now lives, like a spider.

Or a fly.

The philosopher is commonly read as an absolute nihilist, a relativist, or, in academic-speak, an antifoundationalist—someone who thinks there is no meaning, truth, or actual state of things (no foundation or ground) to know. What Nietzsche called his No-sayings are embraced, celebrated, and repeated endlessly in countless forms, including in the very heart of the contemporary humanities. What he called his Yes-sayings (and considered *much* more important)—which involved things like his own ecstatic deification, the physical immortality of the person, and a will to power over time itself—are studiously avoided, vociferously denied, or simply read away in deflating, ironic, or purely metaphorical terms.[13] He could not have possibly meant *that*.

Such misreadings are especially common in contemporary intellectual circles, particularly in those marked postmodern, where such nihilistic relativisms and depressing readings are frankly rampant and continue to do endless institutional, social, and now political damage.[14] Nietzsche actually considered those who only overthrow and devalue things and will not create new values his enemies, and he explicitly wrote that "all nay-saying is the province of impoverished people."[15] Yeah, he wrote that.

Although much of Nietzsche's thought did indeed contribute powerfully and persuasively to relativist, perspectivist, or antifoundational modes of knowledge with respect to cognitive or linguistic ways of knowing (that is, ordinary rational knowledge based on language, history, and sensory input), he was working to *overcome* European nihilism and relativism by making very direct normative claims on both truth and the real from the depths of his own immediate experiences (that is, non-ordinary or nonrational knowledge based on rare spiritual experiences). He could thus write that "every word is a kind of prejudice," but he could also claim to know "reality *as it is*."[16] *Both* were true. Again, there are two floors, not one.

Nietzsche knew perfectly well that humanity still lacked any goal—was lost on the first or lower floor, on the chessboard, as it were—but he also claimed to know what the singular goal or ultimate meaning of humanity really was, or could be, if we but chose to *will* it. Put in the clearest

and most blunt of terms: "Human existence is uncanny and still without meaning. . . . I want to teach humans the meaning of their existence: which is the superhumans."[17] Such a meaning or goal, of course, has been, up to now, hopelessly scattered and confused, as any good comparativist knows perfectly well: "A thousand goals have there been so far, for a thousand peoples have there been. Only the yoke for the thousand necks is still lacking: the *one* goal is still lacking. And yet humanity has no goal. But tell me, my brothers, if the goal of humanity is still lacking, is there not also still lacking—humanity itself?"[18]

This was the task of philosophy for him, then: not to work in words and relative truth and moral claims that could easily be deconstructed or historicized away (his famous "genealogical" method or "*history of origins*"[19]) but to know the real outside of all these historical, linguistic, and cognitive filters as it really is, directly and definitively.

No one, then, wrote more to get us to the superhumanities than Friedrich Nietzsche. No one also wrote more that has prevented the same. Nietzsche, in other words, did not just initiate the superhuman in modern Western intellectual history. He also ruined it for the rest of us. Or more accurately, and much more fairly to Nietzsche himself, no academic reception history of a single thinker has done more to prevent the superhumanities from taking shape than the reception, or anti-reception, of Friedrich Nietzsche.[20]

But it need not be so.

I am presently reading as much of the Nietzschean corpus and its surrounding secondary scholarly literature as I can, including the translated *Nachlass*, or notebooks, written during and after the key Zarathustra period—that is, from the summer of 1881, when he had his mystical encounter with reality as it is, to his physical and psychological collapse in January 1889, when he effectively disappeared from us, probably from a cancerous brain tumor.[21]

I have not found what I assumed I would find. I have not found an angry atheist or a naysaying nihilist, much less a postmodern deconstructionist. I have found a godless mystical writer who ecstatically described himself as the "most spiritual" of human beings.[22] I found a philosopher who seriously compared himself to Plato and the Buddha, and who openly described his deconstructive No-saying books—works like *A Genealogy of Morals* and *Beyond Good and Evil*—as mere "fish hooks" (*Angelhaken*), means to catch the reader for the *vastly* more important Yes-saying book of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and its twin teachings of eternal recurrence and the Superman. Indeed, when all is said and done, Nietzsche wished "to be

only a Yes-sayer."[23] The genealogies and deconstructions, it turns out, were just warm-up.

What I found reading Nietzsche, in other words, was that academics generally ignore, really *reverse*, Nietzsche's own authorial intentions and far-seeing ecstatic voice and focus instead on those books or passages that confirm our own nearsighted nihilisms and deconstructions. We refuse to look too far. We turn away from the seer's superhumanism and turn back to our own humanism. In Nietzschean terms, we choose to remain "puny" (*kleine*).

Perhaps most surprising of all, what I found in Nietzsche was what might well be considered *the* origin point of modern evolutionary spiritualities, or what I have elsewhere described and tracked as modern evolutionary esotericisms. More specifically, I found a rigorous philosophical vision of a coming super-species with power over time itself, a vision that was in turn founded on an actual direct encounter with the real, including the actual structure of space and time, and a subsequent series of altered states and altered texts composed to express this encounter poetically but truly.

I confess that I was stunned. For almost two decades, I had attempted to trace the endless ramifications and cultural and moral explorations of these evolutionary spiritualities and their paranormal effects through Victorian psychical research, European occultism, American parapsychology, pulp and then science fiction, the California counterculture, the human potential movement, superhero comics, the UFO phenomenon, and the history of science. I always thought these evolutionary esotericisms had definitively begun in such figures as the Indian philosopher Sri Aurobindo and the Catholic paleontologist and theologian Teilhard de Chardin, with earlier quick but relatively unimportant precedents in figures like the naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace.

I was wrong.

To begin with, I was wrong about Wallace's unimportance. Alfred Russel Wallace, it turns out, was very seriously and very elaborately proposing what he himself called a "spiritual" evolutionary line that was separate from the biological one within an elaborate double model of evolution.[24] He also literally described such spiritual phenomena (by which he meant those occurring around the séance and mediums of British Spiritualism), of which he had numerous and immediate experiences, as "superhuman." For him, these superhuman spiritual phenomena were definitely related but not reducible to Darwin's natural selection.

In 1866, for example, Wallace will first use the expression "survival of the fittest" for the organic world, but alongside and in conversation with

the expression "progression of the fittest" for the spiritual world, which for him definitely includes the postmortem world—or the cosmic environment where we go when we die. The organic world and the spiritual world are two different domains, both entirely natural, that Wallace saw as existing in an "unbroken continuity." Evolution is Two. The spiritual or psychic domain is a "supplement," not an "alternation," much less a break in the system of nature. *All* of this for Wallace was "evolution," from "dinosauric gigantism, wingless birds, handsomely adorned but deadly frogs," as Charles H. Smith has it, to the phantasmagoria, strange powers, and Gothic imaginations of the séance room, Victorian Spiritualism, and early psychical research, which Wallace took an intimate and an important part in and knew just as well as the jungles of the Amazonian basin or the tropical islands of the Archipelago.[25]

The result was a vision of evolution that took it *all* in but in different ways specific to the domain in question. Already, then, *at the very beginning of evolutionary theory*, we can easily detect at least four evolutionary domains in a founding figure like Wallace: the inorganic, the biological, the social, and the spiritual. Although never named as such, Wallace wrote about all four evolutionary domains, even if he is most known today only for the second. And "superhuman" was a perfectly accurate gloss of "spiritual," since both pointed toward the extraordinary capacities of humans within the fourth evolutionary domain on the horizon.

And all of this was *before* Nietzsche's famous invocation of the German term *Übermensch*, "Superman" or "Superhuman," in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. But it was no doubt here, in the seer's late ecstatic texts, where the idea of the evolving superhumans found its most sophisticated articulation and still unassimilated implications.

The state of the art on the historical background and intended authorial meanings of the *Übermensch* is probably best represented by Paul S. Loeb and David F. Tinsley in their Stanford translation of the *Nachlass* or unpublished fragments from this period of Nietzsche's life. Briefly, the two scholars distinguish between three different common readings of the *Übermensch*: (1) the *supernatural* use, which is derived from German philology (the mythological or polytheistic use as ancient god, devil, dwarf, fairy, or deified human being); (2) the *superior-individual* use, which is derived from German Romantic literature (the heroic ideal in Thomas Carlyle and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, often applied to figures like Napoleon Bonaparte or Goethe himself); (3) and the *superior-species* use, which is new and original to Nietzsche as his own creation.

In the third sense, the *Übermensch* is a collective singular term referring

to a new species of humans already living, often indifferently, alongside ordinary humans but destined to become dominant. Loeb and Tinsley acknowledge reasons for each possibility but ultimately reject the first two as inadequate and finally unfaithful to Nietzsche's intended meanings. They opt for the last one as the most accurate.

As they proceed through their analyses, they point out that Nietzsche inherited the first two uses from earlier German literature and criticized both extensively and "invented the third use in response to Darwin's theory of the origin of the human species."[26] Indeed, Nietzsche relies heavily on the advances of Darwin's biological science but (not unlike Wallace, but in a different direction) ultimately moves beyond them. Nevertheless, it was precisely because of the Darwinian revolution that Nietzsche "was able to conceive the idea that humans might be capable of further evolution and even create a better species."[27]

I simply cannot stress this enough. Nietzsche intended his own esoteric understanding of evolution in both a consciously willed *and* a biological sense. Tinsley and Loeb demonstrate that Nietzsche (and Zarathustra) are teaching about a "species" (*Art*) or, better, a "super-species" (*Über-Art*), not a supernatural entity or a special individual or cultural hero, like Napoleon or Goethe, as some previous interpreters have much preferred (or just wished).[28] The translators will have none of this. Here is how they sum up the Nietzschean concept of the *Übermensch* or super-species on the horizon of real biological and cultural history:

> In the chapter on poets, Zarathustra ridicules the poetic invention of fantastic superhuman beings living in castles on clouds [that is, the first supernatural use]. But in this preface [of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*] he articulates a completely immanent and naturalistic concept of superhumans. He has Zarathustra teach that superhumans will really exist in the future on the actual earth and that they will represent a further and superior stage in the development that has already taken place on the way from actually existing animal species like worms and apes to the actually existing human species. . . . [In sum, Nietzsche] was inspired by Darwin's discoveries to conceive of the idea that human beings might be driven by their tremendous will to power into creating a superior species that would relate to all human beings, no matter how extraordinary, in the same way that humans now relate to apes.[29]

Note that Nietzsche did not restrict this evolutionary process to human beings. Hence this from the notebooks: "You have indeed made the jour-

ney from worm to human!"[30] It was about *all* of biological evolution, with the human, or future superhuman, as the truly exceptional end or goal: "We are chosen and the most superterrestrial ones on earth."[31]

Such an evolutionary vision in turn explains why God must die, or better, why all belief in God or the gods must end: so that superhumans can live. It is time to "take back" our theological projections and claim them for what they have always been: ambiguous and unconscious acknowledgments of our own superhuman natures that have mostly functioned as refusals to take responsibility for who we really are, or, better, are secretly becoming.

And so we get lines like these in the notebooks: "Our contempt for h(umans) drove us beyond the stars. Religion, metaphysics, as symptom of a desire to create superhumans."[32] In short, Nietzsche reads the entire history of religions, with all its gods or God, as so many failed attempts to imagine what he now saw and knew: a coming superhuman species who will overcome the human species and take over the earth, much as we now suspect *homo sapiens* or Cro-Magnons once did to other branches of an earlier common species, like the Neanderthals in ancient Europe.

It is important to underline just how radical this actual biological super-species reading is in relationship to earlier Nietzschean scholarship, which has often wanted nothing to do with any such notion. Walter Kaufmann, for example, reads the famous "scholarly oxen" passage in which Nietzsche mocks those academic readers who detect Darwinism in his Superman as a condemnation of "those who construe the overman in evolutionary terms."[33] But Nietzsche makes no such reference to "evolutionary terms." He is writing of *Darwinism*, which is a very specific interpretation of evolution via natural selection that he indeed rejected as a partial truth.

After Loeb and Tinsley, what Nietzsche meant is clear. He was rejecting Darwinism, not evolution itself. Indeed, for Loeb now, he was advancing his own vision of a new super-species that could be brought into existence through the will to power and, more particularly as we shall soon see, through the power to will *backwards*. This explains his rejection of Darwinism. He certainly suggests the same in *Beyond Good and Evil*, where he explicitly links the Darwinists and the anti-teleologists, that is, those who reject any purpose, goal, or intention in evolution.[34]

Nietzsche considered Darwin, with his theory of human pointlessness, to be a "mediocre spirit" for "mediocre minds" who was skilled at collecting "small and common facts and then drawing conclusions from them." "Spirits of a high type," like Nietzsche, like the coming superhu-

mans, are not about such mere knowledge. Indeed, Nietzsche surmises that such high spirits might even have to *not* possess such knowledge so as to fly on their own higher paths. Theirs is the call not to know little facts, but "to *be* something new, to *signify* something new, to *represent* new values." Darwin's discoveries are much too narrow, petty, and arid for such a grand soul.[35]

Such an evolving superhuman thinks rather like this:

> When I considered *purpose* I also considered chance.
>
> It has to be possible to explain the world through purposes and to explain the world through chance: through thought as much as will, through movement as much as tranquility: through God as much as the Devil. For, all of this *is* the I.
>
> These perspectives from which we see things are not *our own*; they are the perspective of a being of the same kind as us, a *greater being: whose images we gaze into*.[36]

Not exactly the Nietzsche who is remembered in the deconstructive academy today.

There are further historical nuggets in the translators' essay that bear rather directly on our interests here. One, which the authors introduce immediately as "most striking," is the historical predominance of the adjectival form *übermenschlich* or "superhuman," which was used as early as the sixteenth century, "when the German theologian Wendelin Steinbach defined it by reference to the Latin adjective *supernaturalis* in terms of qualities that are beyond human, such as immortality."[37] (I will return to the theological meanings of the supernatural around anomalous phenomena and the making of saints in the next chapter.)

From other scholarly sources, we learn additional details about how it was another German intellectual, Johan Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), the great German poet, statesman, and cultural icon, who was probably the first major writer to bring the word *Übermensch* into literary use when he picked up a much older medieval story to dramatize the Devil as the bestower of magical powers and cosmic knowledge to a depressed and suicidal scholar in his massively influential play *Faust*. The *Übermensch* here was the devilish academic. Significantly, the term appears in a heavenly voice addressed to a *superhumanist intellectual*, himself intent on striving to know "endless Nature." The single line reads thus: "What vexes you, oh Übermensch!" (*Welch erbärmilich Grauen Fasst Übermenschen dich!*).

Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen explains the original meaning of the word and its nonexistent reception: "Although the term was used only this one time in *Faust*, the image and implications of a superhuman longing for knowledge and mastery is woven throughout the entire play. And it was the themes of heroic self-exertion and psychic and spiritual longing that served as the leitmotif of so much of Goethe's corpus."[38] Still, English translators made little, or literally nothing at all, of the term. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for example, did not even translate the German term. Others chose "demigod" or "superhuman" but to no real cultural effect. No one noticed. It was a cultural dud that landed dully, or did not land at all.

This is where Nietzsche came in. His use of *Übermensch* did have a cultural effect, and a massive one, especially in the United States, where many believed, elitist and aristocratic implications aside, that the Superman "had found his natural habitat."[39] In some real sense, he had. No concept of Nietzsche was more popular, and more riven, than the Superman, as Ratner-Rosenhagen shows again and again for almost five hundred beautifully detailed pages.

What is also significant with Nietzsche is that, contrary to the academic assumption (or just wish), the *Übermensch* is no tangential idea in his body of work that he quickly abandons or sets aside. He in fact uses the same term *hundreds of times*, if, yes, mostly in his private notebooks. He seldom uses the adjectival form (about fifty times in his total body of work) but much more often employs the noun *Übermensch* (almost two hundred times). There is no getting around the fact: the coming superhumans are absolutely central to Nietzsche's late spiritual and intellectual life.

Like Wallace before him, Nietzsche was basing such a fantastic claim not on speculation or "thinking," nor simply on any ancient Greek text or previous author, but on a series of extraordinary direct experiences, including his own seeing of the coming superhumans. And many of these claimed experiences, believe it or not, were of his own deification.

You think I am kidding? Allow me to quote a few of Nietzsche's ecstatic claims to divinity (he used the word all the time). Consider his well-known claim, on January 6, 1889, in a letter to Jacob Burkhardt, that "I am all names in history" (*jeder Name in der Geschichte ich bin*). One thinks of Arthur Schopenhauer's earlier idealist observation that there is only "one eye of the world that gazes out from all cognizing creatures."[40] Taking the same claim further still (and sounding downright New Age), Nietzsche would even write Wagner's widow around the same time to tell her, "Among the Indians I was Buddha and in Greece I was Dionysius—Alexander and Caesar are my incarnations."

Much earlier, in November 1882, not long after his mystical realization at Sils Maria, he would jot this in his notebooks: "I have the *most extensive* soul of all Europeans now living or who ever lived: Plato Voltaire—it depends on conditions that do not entirely depend on me, but rather on the 'essence of things'—I could become the European Buddha: which admittedly would be a counterpart of the Indian one."[41] I know such lines are commonly dismissed by philosophers, or read metaphorically, or as signs of an approaching madness. Earlier American and British commentators described the final books, where such lines are both foreshadowed and developed in great detail, as "the blasphemies of a mad atheist" and as "the most insane portions of his work."[42]

Of course they did.

But I take such final lines very seriously, indeed as perfectly plausible (which is not to say literally). I do so because I *recognize* them. In the end, I am most interested in what Ratner-Rosenhagen, alluding to a very late letter of the philosopher, calls the "post-Rubicon Nietzsche."[43] The seer had indeed "crossed over" (a *very* ancient and central Indian expression, by the way). The claim to be all names in history is a perfectly fine descriptor of a most radical idealism shining through the endless masks of ego and society.

I do not read Nietzsche's "ecstatic speech," then, as a sign of impending madness, although that very neurological condition, I suspect, helped reveal or release them (SB 322–25). I read such deified claims as perfectly accurate descriptions of a much greater form of consciousness that was bursting through the writer's deteriorating body and brain. I read them empirically *and* imaginally as perfectly honest descriptions of what he actually knew *and that was so*.

Indeed, in this same comparative light, such famous Nietzschean one-liners read rather humbly and not at all surprisingly. His constant claims to be the "first" to realize this or that truth, for example, are clear giveaways to my ear. This, after all, is *exactly* how mystics talk and write, whether such a claim is justified or not (it is certainly phenomenologically true, as the individuals now feel entirely unique, or utterly alone, among their contemporaries).

We can also easily find other genres of ecstatic speech in comparative mystical literature. The Muslim mystic al-Bistami (804–74) famously proclaimed, "Glory be to me! How great is my glory!" Bistami's successor in ecstatic speech, al-Hallaj (858–922), is said to have uttered phrases such as, "I am the Truth" (read: "I am God") and was crucified (upside down) for such outrageous offenses to Islamic orthodoxy.

Tired of deified men? Consider the Christian mystic Catherine of Genoa (1447–1510), who once described her own most profound realization this way: "The proper centre of every one is God Himself. . . . My *Me* is God, nor do I recognize any other *Me* except my God Himself." This, of course, makes both Catherine and God "all names in history." Exactly.

So what do we do with Nietzsche's famous atheism and rejection of religion? Well, we *understand* them. What disgusted him most about religion were not its bold or extravagant claims (his were more so) but its "solemn toy trumpeters" and "dreary doctrines and lies." It was also all of that disgusting *kneeling*, the embodied groveling before an imaginary God made up by priests and rulers who wanted to control other people: "Your knees worship, but your heart knows nothing of it." Prayer, too, is a kind of whimpering. Such are the "habits of slaves." It is all just so small, so "puny," he would say with the utmost contempt. This is why it is so "treasonous" when someone strives for true greatness beyond the herd of religion. But most of all, religion is looking the wrong way: it is looking *backward* to the past, not *forward* to the future.[44]

The paradox of this denial of the religious past that is also a most radical affirmation of the spiritual future is captured in fragments like these: "I am Zarathustra the Godless: who speaks here: who is more godless than I am? Then I want to become his disciple." Or: "I want apostles but not quiet corners and communities." "People of faith," Nietzsche observed in the same paradoxical spirit, "do not hate freethinkers the most, but rather new thinkers that have a new faith." Indeed, the freethinker or the free spirit is "the most religious person that now exists." In him, "God killed God."[45]

Not exactly your typical atheist. More like the ultimate teacher of being spiritual but not religious.

It is so important to keep in mind that all these astonishing ecstatic speech claims were a result of a revelation Nietzsche received in the summer of 1881. As I alluded, Nietzsche's realization of the eternal recurrence of the same, which he claims to be uniquely given to him as a historical first and to be "the most scientific" of truths, came to the philosopher in August 1881, just outside Sils Maria, Switzerland.[46] It happened near a large Alpine boulder on the shores of Silvaplana Lake, "6,000 feet above man and time," as he confessed the most significant moment of his life on a sheet of paper just after the event.[47]

The scribbled notation is interesting, because it encodes *both* the teaching of the Superman ("6,000 feet above man . . .") *and* the eternal recurrence of the same (". . . and time"). It implicitly links what are in fact his twin teachings. Put a bit differently, it expresses a vision of both the

future human and the superficiality of history as we normally think of the latter in strictly linear or straight causal terms. And, of course, the double image relies entirely on a symbolism of "up" or "super" (*über*). You can still go and look at the rock up there.[48] It hasn't moved. Seems appropriate. Same rock.

The next eight years would see a storm of writing until the day he fell into psychic oblivion, on January 4, 1889, in a plaza in Turin, Italy. For the astonished writer, these were eight years of awe trying to write out a secret that he himself believed would change the course of human history, indeed that *would help evolve humanity*. And why not? He had seen that "the humans who were overcome were themselves the fathers of the superhumans. Thus do I teach and do not grow weary of it: humans are something that must be overcome: for behold, I know that they *can* be overcome—I saw them, the superhumans."[49]

The Nietzschean tropes of the coming superhumans and the death of God—and, I would add, the writer's perfectly accurate prophetic statements about the future importance of his own writings—are actually a function of a more fundamental idea or ground thought (*Grundconception*) that is much closer to what sets this most spiritual man apart from the rest of us puny humans. Michael Allen Gillespie calls it "Nietzsche's final teaching," the basic lineaments of which can be intuited from the writer's various scattered references in his late books to what he most reverently called the "eternal recurrence of the same" (*ewige Wiederkunft des Gleichen*).[50]

Eternal. The *same*. Words and ideas like these are not what Nietzsche is most known for today. They are about as far from nihilism, relativism, secularism, and the conventional postmodern rejection of metaphysics as one can imagine.[51] Perhaps this is why such phrases horrify so many intellectuals, as if eternity were nothing more than a medieval superstition and sameness nothing more than a horrible modernist sin against endless "difference," that is, against ultimate meaninglessness, which these same intellectuals seem set on defending at all costs to the fracturing and near destruction of the humanities today.

And yet these words—the *eternal*, the *same*—are exactly what Nietzsche meant to convey in his final and most important teaching. For Nietzsche, who I am, who you are, what we are experiencing right now, down to the smallest details, including the reading of these words on this page, will all happen again at some point in another cycle of the infinity of the future, just as they have in the infinity of the past. This is the case because *the future is the past*, because *temporality is circular*. It is actually *the same smallest*

details of the same life living themselves in and as us over and over again. In this life, here and now, we are in physical fact immortal. We are always here.

Paul Loeb explains. In this reading, the future arcs back and so is identical to its own past. Both meet in the "gateway" (*Thorweg*) or "moment" (*Augenblick*), literally the "blink of an eye" of the present (perhaps related to what comparative mystical literature often calls the Now). For Nietzsche, the past and future only *seem* to stretch into an already happened, unrepeatable past and a not yet happened, unrepeatable future. In Nietzschean fact, like the equatorial lines on the globe, these two temporal "lines" actually constitute a single finite but unbounded circle or sphere, as was geometrically conceived in a non-Euclidean fashion already in 1854, by Bernhard Riemann, a geometry that was known in Nietzsche's time, and by Nietzsche himself.[52] Indeed, Loeb has reminded us that Nietzsche scholars such as Alistair Moles and Robin Small have demonstrated in abundance that the philosopher was "availing himself of the very latest thinking in cosmological theory, including Friedrich Zöllner's theory of Riemannian curved space."[53] This is probably one reason that Nietzsche insisted his teaching of eternal recurrence was "the most scientific" of truths.

Although I cannot pursue the reading here, this is also why I read Nietzsche's final teaching on eternal recurrence as an expression of an empirically accurate encounter with what modern cosmology today calls the "block universe"—a new reality that makes very good sense of Nietzsche's otherwise mind-bending (or space-time-bending) claims. The block universe is a physical cosmos in which the past, present, and future are all already "there," complete, as it were and so always literally, physically "recurring." Hence the extremely common phenomena of precognition, that is, cognizing another place and time "up ahead" the eternal block, which is always happening, always really and truly recurring in this same eternal block. The flow of time is a neurological phenomenon within such a block cosmology, a function of how our brains and bodies interact with this block universe as we appear to "move" through it. Put a bit differently, space and time are not "out there." They are "in here."

This, of course, is more or less what Kant had argued well before Nietzsche. Indeed, few figures in the modern history of the humanities have been more influential than the German idealist philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). It is probably not too much of an exaggeration to say that in books like *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787), with its analyses of how the human mind perceives reality not as it is but as it appears in and through the a priori categories of the human mind, Kant has defined the deepest philosophical assumptions of intellectuals to this very day.

The argument is persuasive. According to Kant, we do not and *cannot* perceive or know things as they really are. We can only perceive and know their appearances (*phenomena*), or how these things appear to our minds. Hence also what he so famously called the "limits of reason." This most basic distinction between things as they are in themselves and appearances and these so-called limits have been endlessly used to dismiss any and all forms of ecstatic or extreme human experiences as so many delusional epiphenomena (as just appearances) that should not be taken seriously. They *cannot* be empirical or objectively true. They can only be imagined, because they are only "appearances," pragmatic functions of how the human psyche, which is entirely determined by local language, culture, and history, fools itself.

It is simply not possible to work and live in the humanities today and not unconsciously assume these Kantian ideas. They are foundational. Indeed, they are probably *the* major historical reason that most intellectuals today do not trust any human experience and why the hermeneutics of suspicion reigns supreme. Almost everyone is a Kantian of some sort. They truly believe that reality can never be known as it really is, that it can only be known in its (false) phenomenal and culturally loaded appearances.

As someone who was once trained in Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, which insist that the real as such cannot only be known as such *but that this is the very purpose and goal of a human life-form*, I have always found this Western academic assumption to be a rather obvious and most dubious piece of Eurocentrism. Why stay within these reasonable (European) limits when much of humanity has not? Who says they are limits, and to what end?

I have also seriously wondered whether we have really understood the implications of Kant's idealism. Few, for example, consider the possibility that what Kant was also saying, or at least pointing toward, is that our very conceptions of space, time, and causality (all a priori categories of the human mind, after all) are not "out there" either; that they, too, are functions of the human mind, not of the really real. Few intellectuals, in other words, take the implications of Kant's idealism far enough. They take his takedowns and stop there.

I suppose that is Kantian enough: stay within your rational and sensible limits. But—and here is my deeper point—Nietzsche did *not* stop there. He claimed to experience the real outside any and all a priori categories. And, if I may, *precisely* because of this fantastic superhuman claim, Friedrich Nietzsche is not only the most spiritual father of the Superman; he is also our most important godless mystic of the space-time block.

Seen in this new (or very old) light, Nietzsche's key adjective *eternal*, as in the "eternal recurrence of the same" would mean the ability to go around and around such a temporal circle or spatial sphere forever. Here the physical world is known "as a perfect 'golden round ring.'"[54] It is no accident that the *ouroboros*, the ancient (gnostic and Hermetic) symbol of the snake biting its own tail, was a favorite of the philosopher's that he used throughout his life.[55] As he wrote in his notebooks: "The past bites all that is future in the tail."[56]

Loeb encourages us not to imagine here an infinite number of cycles spread out or succeeding one another through some kind of absolute time axis. As in modern physics, there is no absolute time, and time is always dependent on an observer. Put a bit differently, what is past, present, and future depend on one's embodied perspective, which is always the same within any single and repeating life cycle for Nietzsche. Loeb again explains: "Imagine just a single finite (though unbounded) circular course (*Kreislauf*) in which is represented, not just the recurrence of all things, but also of all those moments of time that cannot exist independently of those things. Since for Nietzsche time just is a series of those moments, it follows that time itself is destroyed, recreated, and repeated along with everything else. Thus, when I am recreated so as relive my identical life, the time at which I am recreated and live my life is always exactly the same."[57]

This also implies that the person is immortal, *physically immortal*, since the life cycle is always repeated, over and over again without end.[58] Moreover, there really is no death, since there is no body, and so no time, between the recurring life cycles of the same. This is what Nietzsche meant when he wrote or spoke of redemption: "I teach you redemption from eternal flux: the flux also flows back into itself again and again, and you always step into the same flux again and again, as the same people."[59]

More radically still (if that is possible), Loeb has also argued that *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* encodes in its complex narrative events, multiple symbolic allusions, and operatic organization what might well be the first time-travel story in Western literature. It predates by over a decade what is commonly thought of as the first science fiction time-travel story in 1895, by H. G. Wells, including what is commonly thought of as the "bootstrap paradox" of time travel—that is, the paradox of influencing or even changing one's own past and so one's own present (more legitimate science fiction).[60]

Loeb's literary argument is complex, and I do not pretend to understand it all, but it can be sufficiently summarized for our purposes in this way: "Nietzsche constructed the narrative structure of his book in such a way

that the narrative event of Zarathustra's self-redemption actually exhibits his discovery and exercise of his ability to will backward in time."[61] As Nietzsche has Zarathustra proclaiming in his notes as he planned the writing of the book: "Redemption! I taught the will even how to will backward" (*Erlösung! Den Willen lehrte ich das Zurückwollen*).[62] Or, a bit more enigmatic in the notebooks: "the redemption of those who have passed away."[63] Or again: "and whether I count forward from now or backward from now: I hold the belt of infinity in my hand."[64]

It is important to recognize that, for Loeb, such an ability to will backward in time influences or revalues the past *but does not and cannot change it*. This is how, I presume, he escapes the aforementioned bootstrap paradox, sometimes also called the grandfather's paradox (one cannot go back in time and kill one's grandfather, since that would eliminate one's future self doing the killing). As Loeb explains more fully in a key passage: "The point of willing backwards is not to will now so as to *alter* or *undo* what is already done, but rather to will now so that what is already done *is such as it is and not otherwise* precisely because of this creative present willing."[65]

Still, such a retroactive (which is also a proactive or precognitive) influence can include the most remarkable phenomena, like the older, stronger, and wiser self leaving symbolic signs, omens, dreams, even coded markers in the physical environment for the younger self. We see this, for example, in Loeb's reading of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as a figurative exhibition or narrative display of precisely this backward-willing power. In Loeb's language, "Nietzsche designed the narrative of his book so that it exhibits Zarathustra's backward-willed communications to himself."[66]

Such ideas might sound absurd until one encounters living human beings, including one's own students, who report extremely detailed visits from their own future selves in moments of crisis or great need. It happens still, in the eternal recurrence of the same. The impossible is not impossible at all. It is up to us now to rethink our reality in order to acknowledge and incorporate the same.

Put in the terms of our present moment, we cannot possibly understand what happened to Nietzsche before the rock "6,000 feet above man and time" until we get out of our subjectivisms—that is, until we can cease seeing the humanities as concerned with nothing more than illusory epiphenomena in our heads, as "representations" and "discourses" (the early Foucault again). Contrary to what many assume, Nietzsche claimed an actual encounter with the empirical natures of human being and time itself. He was making a claim on the real out of the altered states of his own body and mind, and he was encoding those altered states in his al-

tered texts. This is precisely why so many readers have found themselves in a state of near-enlightenment reading these books: such readers are genuinely grokking that elevation of consciousness secreted in the Nietzschean texts.

But not everyone can accept this. It bears repeating: "You don't want to hear that someone is strolling around above your heads. And so you put wood and earth and refuse between him and your heads—that's how you muffle the speech of his steps."[67] They cannot endure that there is such a thing as "up" at all. And so they deny that there is. That is how Nietzsche has been received in the humanities. Or, better, not received at all: "Ultimately, nobody can get more out of things, including books, than he already knows. For what one lacks access to from experience one will have no ear. Now let us imagine an extreme case: that a book speaks of nothing but events that lie altogether beyond the possibility of any frequent or even rare experience—that it is the first language for a new series of experiences. In that case, simply nothing will be heard, but there will be the acoustic illusion that where nothing is heard, nothing is there."[68]

Given my focus in these pages on rare but real experiences among major intellectuals and how they sought to transform these states into "the first language for a new series of experiences" (which we now call the humanities), these lines seem more than apt. After all, if my thesis is correct about the humanities having their deepest roots in the superhumanities, in these same rare or even new states, it might well be true that the original experiences have not and *cannot* be heard.

But it is also true that the ideas that emerged from these extreme experiences, these "first languages," have been heard, read, analyzed, even celebrated, if in indirect and incomplete ways. That is why we still read and teach them—to listen, to understand, perhaps even to visit ourselves from our own futures, to will backward in time. In effect, we are doing exactly what Nietzsche called for in a letter to one of his first American translators about *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: we are trying to "*catch up with* the inner experiences from which that work could arise."[69]

WILLIAM JAMES: FROM THE PSYCHICAL TO THE PRAGMATIC

Another iconic exemplar of the superhumanities is the Harvard psychologist-philosopher William James (1842–1910). James was the son of a famous Swedenborgian father, Henry James Sr. (Spiritualism again),

and the brother of an even more famous novelist, Henry James Jr. But it is William's academic credentials, which completely ignore the supposed distinctions between the sciences and the humanities, that wow:

> He was the first to wrest control of psychology from the abstract philosophers by adapting study of mental functioning to the methods of physiology. He was the first to take up the scientific study of consciousness within the context of the new evolutionary biology. He was the first to teach the new scientific psychology in the United States in 1875; the first to open a laboratory for student instruction that same year; the first to grant a Ph.D. in the new discipline, to G. Stanley Hall, in 1878; and the first American to write a world-famous textbook, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890).[70]

But James is important for us here not only because he was the first but also because this *origo et fons* has been only partially received and, more to my present point, because the safe and philosophical part that *has* been received and integrated is seldom adequately related to the weird and woolly phenomena to which James dedicated much of his life and thought. In his own language (predating the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz's famous insistence on "thick description" by over half a decade), James's own "thick" involvement in the "spook-haunted" "supernormal facts" of psychical research—with what he called the "wild beasts of the philosophical desert"[71]—has been more or less ignored for his commitments to the academically safe philosophies of pragmatism and antifoundationalism.

As I briefly explained earlier, *antifoundationalism* is an umbrella term for a whole host of movements that deny the existence of any metaphysical foundation or ground from which to construct a worldview or ethics. Plato and transcendence are the enemies here. Such a position is generally traced back to Nietzsche (quite falsely, I believe), with figures such as Derrida and Foucault as more modern and more accurate exemplars. Pragmatism is a species of antifoundationalism. It is the argument that an idea should be considered true not because its content or claim corresponds with some external objective reality that is true for everyone (the correspondence theory of truth) but because the claim or statement is useful for a specific task or function at hand, that is, true for someone for some useful purpose. James was indeed something of a pragmatist. No denying that. But he also wrote explicitly of the "thick" and the "thin," and he decidedly aligned himself with the former supernormal spook-haunted realm, no matter how disreputable (or unpragmatic) it got.

Like Nietzsche, we have received exactly that half of James that he himself saw as subordinate and, frankly, of much less importance and grandeur. The simple truth is that James was pragmatic about his pragmatism, using it when it was useful but setting it down or aside when it was not, as we shall soon see. Accordingly, James is traditionally, and correctly, understood to be one of the founding members of American pragmatism. James's famous "fruits, not roots" approach is generally assumed to be his final answer. The little (gospel-derived) meme can be glossed thus: Do not bother about ontological questions, about roots. Focus instead on moral or pragmatic questions, on what works, that is, on fruits.

Much of twentieth-century American thought has followed these same pragmatic lines, especially in the humanities, where a more social scientific functionalism and subsequent moralism (oddly, without ground) now reigns supreme and nearly without challenge. Put simply, functionalism works like this: Do not ask whether extraordinary experiences might have some actual ontological object or source, whether, say, a person's shocking contact with a dead loved one or out-of-body flight to another geographical region might be empirical in some sense—that is, whether such reports might become resources (not conclusions) for our search for the actual structures of space and time and their relationship to consciousness. Do not, that is, dally with a correspondence theory of the truth. Such human experiences can only be "true" (scare quotes motioned now with the bending forefingers of each hand) in pragmatic ways; they can only serve particular practical functions such as making us feel better, helping us deal with death and suffering, binding us together as a community, and so on. Basically, social science stuff you can put on a questionnaire, ask people about, and, above all, measure.

Put crassly, focus on how this or that belief will translate at the ballot box (votes can be *counted*), or how it will result in a bigger or smaller parking lot at the megachurch, temple, or synagogue (attendance can be *counted*). But never ever ask whether the religious teaching being proclaimed inside the building is true or not in any corresponding or cosmic sense.

I am getting a bit crabby, but only to make a point. There are real and powerful consequences of functionalism, which I do not want to dismiss. But there are also inevitable negative consequences, which can border on the ridiculous. It is often observed, for example, that attending religious services is statistically correlated with longer life spans. Or that a regular meditation practice will likely increase positive health outcomes. Or that white Evangelical Protestants will vote overwhelmingly for the conservative political candidate. This is no doubt the case in each case. It is

also pure functionalism. And where does it lead? What commentator or journalist asks on CNN, much less on Fox News, whether Jesus really was the Son of God, or whether Muhammad really was the last prophet, or whether there is a God at all?

No one, of course.

When religion is addressed, what is really addressed is who will vote for whom in order to further support and construct which religious identity and social agenda. It is all about social constructions and pragmatic functions, never about what might actually be true, much less what might be positively true for all humans. Here, at least, religious truth is a social fiction that endlessly produces other social fictions. It is how one votes (or hates), not what happens to us when we *all* die. It is a question that should burn at the center of all our educations and be the object of our most expensive and well-funded moon shots. Instead, we will not even ask the question. We believe. Or we debunk.

Neither gets us very far.

I often joke to my students that I once naively thought that the Buddha came to teach us about the ultimate nonexistence of the self and the fantastic realizations of nirvana and emptiness—fundamental ontological questions that are as true in Texas as they are in Nepal. But now I know that what Buddhism is really about is how to help us lower our blood pressure and make us good office workers.

Whew. That was close.

Such jokes are not tangential to how we have read (or not read) William James. Everyone, in my orbit at least, reads his justly famous *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), which is probably one of the two or three most influential works on religion of the twentieth century. It is *that* important, and *that* good. Accordingly, the same canonical work in the humanities is read on both an undergraduate and graduate level to this day. In my own graduate days reading this canonical text, we talked endlessly about James's rejection of medical materialism—the strong tendency to pathologize and reduce religious experiences to "abnormal" states of mind and body—his distinction between private religious experience and institutional religion, his profoundly influential analysis and four-point definition of mystical experience, his psychology of conversion, and so on.

But—and here is the point I am trying to make in my complaints—*no one* told us that James was also an inveterate psychical researcher *and* psychedelic experimentalist; that he spent much of his life studying (mostly female) mediums in both the United States and Europe; that he addressed head-on the question of what happens to us when we die; or that he helped

train an undergraduate student who would become one of the twentieth century's most important critical race theorists, W.E.B. DuBois. Much less did anyone suggest, as I do here, that the psychical studies may have actually helped produce key Jamesian ideas, such as his central notion of a "radical empiricism" (stay in the "thick" of human experience, no matter how strange or absurd the details become), his metaphysical speculations about panpsychism and pluralism toward the end of his life, and, yes, even his pragmatism.

Allow me to emphasize the likely relationship between James's embarrassing psychical research and his not-at-all embarrassing pragmatism precisely through his central conviction in a radical empiricism. Allow me to suggest that what has been received (his pragmatism) very much needs to be contextualized within what has not been received (his psychical research and psychedelic self-experimentation) in order to be really understood. Psychical phenomena, after all, are strongly subversive of conventional scientific *and* religious worldviews. They are fundamentally elusive by nature and, likely, in intent. In academic-speak, they are dramatically deconstructive, not just of language and the subject, but of the object as well, indeed of the very natures of space, time, and causality itself. They make figures like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault look tame in comparison. Paranormal phenomena are, in this sense, wildly antifoundational. "Truth" here begins to look exactly like what the pragmatists say it is: a functional linguistic game or social agreement, certainly not an objective feature of the nature of things. A kind of paranormal pragmatism, then.

In short, with such thoughts, allow me to insist on the whole James, James as Two, and not just the parts that make us comfortable. Or, more faithful to his radical empiricism, allow me to affirm and celebrate *all* the parts of William James, human and superhuman alike. This is perfectly faithful to James himself. The philosopher indeed glossed his radical empiricism with the explanations that it was a species of monistic pantheism that affords "the higher degree of intimacy" with the divine, since it makes of every "each-form" a divine expression of the entire universe and insists that "we are substantially one with it," rejecting in the process any abstract or "thin" structure of "philosophy of the absolute" that would reduce all our experienced messiness to some simple unity or absolute. Such a radical empiricism and pluralistic pantheism for him is no clean, pure, or respectable academic project. It involved getting messy, getting real. It involved working closely with what James called the "over-beliefs" and extravagant growths of early New Age forms of thought and experience,

which in James's time were associated with movements like "mind cure" and "New Thought," which he took very seriously and wrote about often. Such a radical empiricism was a "turbid, muddled, gothic sort of affair."[72]

Gothic. This was precisely the word James used to describe the phenomena of psychical research, particularly as it was performed by his Victorian friend, Frederic Myers.[73] Wishes aside, James's psychical research was no minor side interest. The volume in the collected works on the topic is immense. Of course, almost no one reads these pages. Why is that? And why do so few do the obvious and connect all this psychical research to James's famous pragmatism?

One could go on for dozens, hundreds of pages, recounting James's extensive research with this or that medium, including the inimitable Italian super-medium Eusapia Palladino, with whom we began our journey together with Madame Curie and her glowing hair.[74] Sparkling heads aside (or maybe not), pretty much everything James wrote was deeply informed by these currents, literal *currents*, of psychophysical energy.

And this is before we get to the Harvard intellectual's experimentation with diethyl ether, chloroform, alcohol, peyote, and nitrous oxide to catalyze or uncover what he called "mystical consciousness." The latter experiments included his use of nitrous oxide (laughing gas) while reading, of all people, Hegel, to whose philosophy of the absolute Mind or Spirit he was otherwise quite resistant. *Finally*, Hegel made sense; now James could see both the strengths and weaknesses of the Hegelian system. Until, that is, the gas wore off.

Can you imagine what the humanities might become if we tried *that* today? Think about German idealism after we take psilocybin? We would be fired, or worse, of course. As a society, we have literally *criminalized* such altered states of consciousness. We have not cultivated them toward greater philosophical understanding. But this is exactly what William James was doing.

It is seldom observed, much less admitted, but William James was a clear precursor of the use of psychedelic substances to catalyze altered states *and think about the nature of consciousness*. Later key countercultural figures like Timothy Leary (another Harvard psychologist, by the way) and the Buddhist-Jewish queer poet Allen Ginsberg were following James's lead when they set off on a similar path in a very different cultural moment. They were both perfectly aware of James's founding efforts, and they said as much. James himself was following the poet-philosopher Benjamin Blood (1832–1919), who had argued that the use of mind-altering substances carried genuine metaphysical import, could reveal the "genius of being,"

as he put it in a little pamphlet titled *The Anaesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy* (1874).[75] Note again the complete collapse of the empirical (anesthesia) and the imaginal (revelation). Note also an obvious correspondence theory of truth. No pragmatism here.

This is why James was inhaling nitrous oxide while reading Hegel: he had learned from Blood's essay that there was a "sort of ontological intuition, beyond the power of words to tell of, which one experiences while taking nitrous oxide gas and other anesthetics."[76] In *The Will to Believe*, James will go much further and write that "the keynote of the experience is the tremendously exciting sense of an intense metaphysical illumination." And then he would write this on the Human as Two, on our two very different ways of knowing, which cannot seem to communicate with each other but both erupt in and as us: "Truth lies open to the view in depth beneath depth of almost blinding evidence. The mind sees all the logical relations of being with an apparent subtlety and instantaneity to which its normal consciousness offers no parallel; only as sobriety returns, the feeling of insight fades, and one is left staring vacantly at a few disjointed words and phrases, as one stares at a cadaverous-looking snow-peak from which the sunset glow has just fled, or at the black cinder left by an extinguished brand."[77] Hegel, it turns out, was on to something, something really, really big:

> The ego and its objects, the *meum* and the *tuum*, are one. Now this, only a thousandfold enhanced, was the effect upon me of the gas: and its first result was to make peal through me with unutterable power the conviction that Hegelism was true after all, and that the deepest convictions of my intellect hitherto were wrong. Whatever idea or representation occurred to the mind was seized by the same logical forceps, and served to illustrate the same truth; and that truth was that every opposition, among whatsoever things, vanishes in a higher unity in which it is based; that all contradictions, so-called, are but differences; that all differences are of degree; that all degrees are of a common kind; that unbroken continuity is of the essence of being; and that we are literally in the midst of *an infinite*, to perceive the existence of which is the utmost we can attain.[78]

Sit with that. The purpose of life is to perceive and know the existence of the infinite. Hegel's *Geist* actually meant something. It was *true*. And still is.

Reading James in such moments, it is very difficult not to recall the latest reaches of queer or feminist theory and their powerful deconstructions of binary categories, or Derrida's famous deconstruction: "The mind saw

how each term *belonged* to its contrast through a knife-edge moment of transition which *it* effected, and which, perennial and eternal, was the *nunc stans* of life."[79] And yet there is something more, literally *infinitely* more here. There is a metaphysical ground.

It was all of these same (and different) altered states, whether witnessed in his psychical research, experienced in his psychedelic experimentation, or heard about from his early "New Age" believers, that lie behind and give punch and life to *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. This is the secret subtext of that most famous text. *This is what made William James William James*. Note how, for example, in a passage of the book that is seldom noticed, James explicitly links mysticism and psychical phenomena, how he refuses to separate precognition, telepathy, hermeneutics, clairvoyance, and revelation: "The kinds of truth communicable in mystical ways, whether they be sensible or supersensible, are various. Some of them relate to this world—visions of the future, the readings of hearts, the sudden understanding of texts, the knowledge of distant events, for example; but the most important revelations are theological and metaphysical."[80] Notice also how the interpretation of texts ("the sudden understanding of texts") is just slipped in there among all the precognition, the telepathy, and the clairvoyance—a paranormal hermeneutics.

It is also difficult to miss the "supersensible." Clearly, here at least, James was moving well beyond his pragmatism and its refusal to engage in metaphysical speculation. And these trends only increased and radicalized with age. Hence his very late "pluralistic universe," by which James meant a "manyness-in-oneness," a uni-verse that was also a "multiverse" (yes, he used the word).[81] Here was an ontology that emphasized the furthest reaches of human experience and endless plurality before any possible unity or oneness, which, please note, he also recognized as a possible ultimate feature of the same real—a manyness-*in-oneness*, not just a manyness, then.

As it turns out, a Jamesian model of the superhuman was a key to the same pluralistic universe. He meant something very specific by the word. He did not mean the Nietzschean *Übermensch*, although he read and seemed to have little trouble with Nietzsche: "We stumble on; the übermenschen plant a foot where there is no certain hold; & in the struggle that follows, the whole of us get dragged up."[82] In his own understanding, James used the superhuman in reference to the psychophysics of the German experimentalist and early psychologist Gustav Fechner (1801–87) and the contemporary French philosophical sensation Henri Bergson (who, predictably, was also involved in psychical research). By the super-

human, James meant a very specific experiential or flowing awareness that we are each "co-conscious" with greater and greater (but still finite) forms of consciousness, of which we are temporary parts or expressions, and which, ostensibly, reach to the Earth, planets, and the stars (as Fechner clearly believed), even to the cosmos and "God" itself. James was clearly being speculative here, but he was also serious.

And so we come to Fechner's theory of immortality that James summarizes, now with an apparent nod to Schopenhauer's single will temporarily looking out through every eye:

> Fechner likens our individual persons on the earth unto so many sense-organs of the earth's soul. We add to its perceptive life so long as our own life lasts. It absorbs our perceptions, just as they occur, into its larger sphere of knowledge, and combines them with the other data there. When one of us dies, it is as if an eye of the world were closed, for all perceptive contributions from that particular quarter cease. But the memories and conceptual relations that have spun themselves round the perceptions of that person remain in the larger earth-life as distinct as ever, and form new relations and grow and develop throughout all the future.[83]

It is in this same cosmic context that James uses the category of the superhuman, *a lot*. Here are his functionally distinct selves of "superhuman consciousness" that may be conceived in polytheistic or monotheistic terms.[84] Here are his finite "superhuman beings" who need not be identified with the absolute at all.[85] Here is Fechner's (and James's) "superhumanity."[86] Here are the "more enveloping superhuman realms" where we might find a place and a home and that might well end in a "complete God as the all-container."[87] Here is where "finite minds may simultaneously be co-conscious with one another in a superhuman intelligence."[88] Such are the "subordinate superhuman souls" that are also forms of "superhuman consciousness."[89] Here are those "superhuman collections of experience of every grade," that is, the data of psychical research and comparative mystical literature, finally begin to make some sense, since they have, at last, found a suitable ontological framework.[90] The impossible is now possible.

Yes, James wants to ask whether such a superhuman consciousness exists at all, but his suspected answer about such "superhuman unities" and "supernormal facts" is hard to miss at the end of *A Pluralistic Universe*: "I myself firmly believe that most of these phenomena are rooted in reality."[91] That's not pragmatism. That's a clear claim on reality itself. It is also an effective means to move us forward, for only when we stop dismissing

such phenomena (or focusing only on their functions or uses) and give them different, tentative, but also positive frameworks in which they can become possible again can we move on to the question of "whether [the] form [of such superhuman consciousness] be monistic or pluralistic," or, of course, both.[92]

A community of intellectuals, after all, will not ask a question of something they do not believe exists. This is why it is so important to work, however loosely, with what I am calling "new realities." We have to imagine and then think with new ontologies and not just assume our present reigning ones. Otherwise, we will just keep arriving at our already established conclusions, which are simply functions of our assumed ontologies. We will, in effect, be stuck in our presentism.

There are other, much less vicious, much more positive circles to work within. In the end, James himself advances what is a clear Hermetic conviction along the lines discussed in the previous chapter, namely, that our work on this superhuman consciousness is itself both an expression and advance of this superhuman consciousness: *that consciousness is evolving itself in and through such work*. In James's own language, once we take up the pluralistic universe as our working hypothesis, our scholarship and science become "self-reparative through us." Such a universe's "disconnections [are] remedied in part by our behavior. . . . Thus do philosophy and reality, theory and action, work in the same circle indefinitely."[93]

The final truth is that superhumans are *everywhere* in the Jamesian circle; they are both the intellectual agents of this superhermeneutic *and* its desired future goal. They are interpreting themselves into fuller and fuller superhuman forms of co-consciousness.

So why do we not read William James through such a late, really final and mature superhumanism?

Easy. Because it is not depressing. Instead, we are told endlessly how James emphasized difference over similarity, how he could not have possibly been a dreaded "perennialist" (although he often sounds exactly like one), and how he understood all truth as what psychologically worked for a time, what was "pragmatic" (the word could not be any more banal today). That is simply not what William James finally concluded, although his humility and his humor always shine through. Here is what he wrote at the very end of his life, when all was said and done: "The drift of evidence we have seems to me to sweep us very strongly toward the belief in some form of superhuman life with which we may, unknown to ourselves, be co-conscious. We may be in the universe as dogs and cats are in our libraries, seeing the books and hearing the conversation, but having no inkling of

the meaning of it all."[94] There is the word again: *superhuman*. It never goes away. It just keeps getting forgotten or erased. The dog wags by and the cat is fast asleep on the books.

CRITIQUE LIMITS

Perhaps it is all just too much for you: a godless mystic who knew time as circular and saw superhumans coming on the horizon of an ecstatic future; or a Harvard psychologist arriving at a paranormal pragmatism through the radical empiricism of his psychical research, psychedelic experimentation, and metaphysical speculation. Unfortunately, or fortunately, such patterns do not go away because elite intellectuals conditioned by materialist and secular forms of thinking wish them to go away. They continue to scream in our historical sources.

They also continue to shape our own reality-posits, to determine not only what we think is real but what we experience to be real, even how the real behaves and appears to us and *as us*. Consider the thought of the French sociologist Bertrand Méheust. Méheust has written about many things, but his early work was on the nineteenth-century scene in France, Germany, and England and, more specifically, about how these cultures effectively and officially suppressed the medical, scientific, and philosophical implications of "magnetic" or occult phenomena.

What is most significant for our present purposes is how Méheust has argued that these long social repressions and official decisions effectively made the very generation of those same phenomena more or less impossible later in the same century. Intellectual practices have spiritual *and physical* consequences. They make things appear, and they make other things disappear. There is no free lunch.[95]

It is not just the case, then, that there are limits to critique, as Rita Felski has argued with such verve and precision. It is also the case that *critique limits*. That is, criticism really and truly shrinks reality, always into bits and pieces that the critic can then mix and match into his or her own desired world. This is what the official medical commissions of France did with the wild facts of the magnetists and Mesmerists. They rendered them all impossible. And so they became impossible. They went away.

But it has not always been this way, certainly in Europe, as Méheust has shown in great detail, but also in Asia, the Americas, Africa, Australia, and the ancient Mediterranean worlds—although, yes, of course, these cultures repressed other things and so did not arrive at other possibilities. Again, there is no free lunch.

So what do we really think is real? And what do we make of other people's honest and very different convictions about the real, which, presumably, we do not accept. Put most simply, what do we make of human diversity?

ONTOLOGICAL POLYTHEISM AND MORAL PLURALISM

The cultural psychologist and anthropologist Richard Shweder, with whom I opened my reality experiments, has laid out as clearly as anyone our three options for resolving the glaring problem of religious and cultural diversity—the problem of why there are so many different symbolic forms in the cultures and religions of the world. Enter Shweder's essay "Post-Nietzschean Anthropology: The Idea of Multiple Objective Worlds."

Shweder begins the essay by pointing out that such symbolic forms, "all those things that people around the world say and do about witches, ghosts, and spirit possession," are believed to "refer or point beyond themselves to another realm."[96] But how exactly are we supposed to understand such claims, particularly when there are so many of them, and they are all so different? Take again the seemingly simple question, "Why do we see people claiming to be witches in almost every culture, and in contexts involving no coercion or threat?"

Shweder sees three basic options.

The first option is what he calls *ontological atheism*. This is the null hypothesis, which, for Shweder, was first clearly articulated by Friedrich Nietzsche and was most famously and smartly announced in the potent phrase, "God is dead." This declaration, which is announced by Zarathustra in the opening parable of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, happens to correspond with what I have called the seer's mystical realization in August 1881. "Around 1882 Nietzsche thought he had the answer to the witch question. Many contemporary cultural anthropologists think he was right."[97]

This particular answer solves the problem of the plurality of the symbolic forms of the history of religions—all that magic, Mesmerism, and magnetism—by simply arguing that they refer to nothing at all. Their differences need not be our concern because of the same null reference. They are so much fancy or illusion in the head. The answer to the witch question can be paraphrased in this way, then: "There are no witches. We can ask what functions these beliefs serve, but it simply makes no sense to ask to what realities such symbols might point, since there are no such other realms. There are only social functions here, in this world."

The second option is what Shweder calls *ontological polytheism*. This

option reads the endless symbolic forms of the history of religions as evidence for an endless series of actual reality-posits—that is, of different realities: "According to the ontological polytheists the framework of reality is multiplex in disjoint planes, and it makes sense to interpret diversity as though there is more than one objective world."[98] The answer to the witch question would go like this, then: "People claim to be witches in so many cultures because there are witches. Magic really works in some reality-posits, and so people experience themselves as witches. They are correct to do so."

As I understand it, this is the option that Shweder adopts in the essay, the idea of multiple objective worlds of his subtitle. Or, in Shweder's post-Nietzscheanism, "monotheism is dead," but polytheism is quite alive and well. In this polytheistic reality, plurality is not a problem but a gift, since "cultural variety illuminates the multiplicity of objective worlds."[99]

But Shweder also recognizes a third option. This is a kind of mediation between the first and second options. It does not deny the different symbolic forms of human cultures as referring to nothing, as the first option does, but neither does it accept them on their own terms, as the second seems to do. In effect, this third option *lines them up* in a developmental or normative progression or hierarchy. In effect, this third option argues "that reality is uniform or homogenous, and that symbolic forms and reality-posits are not uniform and homogenous around the world because not everyone is equally in touch with reality."[100]

Shweder is fully aware of how destabilizing his own position—ontological polytheism—can be. He summarizes what he does not hesitate to call a "universal truth" this way: "the knowable world is incomplete if seen from any one point of view, incoherent if seen from all points of view at once, and empty if seen from nowhere in particular."[101] Comparison, real unflinching comparison, is *mind-bending*.

As we move into our next chapter, it is very important to recognize that Shweder's ontological polytheism also implies a *moral pluralism*, which is not at all the same thing as moral relativism, conventionalism, or subjectivism. It is simply not the case for Shweder that "anything goes." His is a strong middle position between moral relativism (the ethical is simply a matter of local convention or personal opinion) and moral universalism (there is an objective and absolute moral law that different cultures approximate to different degrees)—a "universalism without uniformity," as he puts it. What this means is that "there is no single and complete rational ordering of morally relevant goods." What this entails is the capaciousness to not assume or suggest that "objective reality is devoid of moral

truths," that "those who disagree with our judgments of right and wrong are either moral cretins or barbarians," *or* that "one's own way of life is the only possible flowering of the ideals of an objective moral character."[102]

In this admittedly rare humility, it can be said that every society works from a particular moral logic, often of a passionate and normative nature (and so is moral in its own terms), but these moral logics are in ethnographic fact different, sometimes *very* different. To put some detail on these philosophical abstractions, there are multiple ethical worlds around what Shweder and his colleagues have identified as the three moral clusters of autonomy, community, and divinity. In the summaries of the moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt (who studied with Shweder), these are, in order: "the idea that people are, first and foremost, autonomous individuals with wants, needs, and preferences"; "the idea that people are, first and foremost, members of larger entities such as families, teams, armies, companies, tribes, and nations"; and "the idea that people are, first and foremost, temporary vessels within which a divine soul has been implanted."[103]

Such a global framing is actually quite helpful in our present context, as we can easily see through such a comparative construct that the modern academy generally only values the legitimacy or existence of the first and second moral clusters (autonomy and, to a lesser extent, community), whereas what I am calling the superhumanities tries to integrate or negotiate a relationship between the first (autonomy) and the second (community) *and* third (divinity), with a strong accent on the third. The contemporary humanities, in other words, "solve" the comparative challenge by essentially deleting or erasing any serious cross-cultural ontological discussion (the "divinity" of the third cluster) and asserting, or just assuming, its own clearly Western and obviously modern individualism and sociology, with the human being now nothing but a historically conditioned and fully material social organism who should be entirely autonomous (but never is).

Many, of course, who do not fall clearly into Shweder's first answer to human diversity (ontological atheism or the null hypothesis) are not so certain. I know that I bounce somewhere between the second and third options (ontological polytheism and a normative spiritual cross-cultural development). I should add, though, that my working hypothesis of a dual-aspect monism, which I am about to introduce under the poetic banner of the Human as Two, aligns quite well with the nondualisms of Hindu and Buddhist Asia, *not* with my own birth culture and its Christian theisms, unless someone like the papally censored Meister Eckhart and his astonishing German sermons are held to represent these same Christian

traditions—a real stretch, I assure you. I ultimately think that the radical Hindus and esoteric Buddhists are simply more correct about the nature of reality than the believing theists.[104] So perhaps I adopt option three.

Or maybe the theists are correct, too, or correct enough, living in their own reality-posits, which they themselves cocreate everyday through ritual, belief, custom, and institution. The real can certainly become "God," if that is what you want and work hard enough to cocreate through ritual, will, and prayer.[105] Certainly, Meister Eckhart said as much: God emerges from worship and belief, somewhere between the abysmal Ground and human belief.

So maybe I take option two.

Or is that option three?

I don't know.

Which leads me to the Human as Two.

3 THE HUMAN AS TWO
Toward an Apophatic Anthropology

> The miracle is that the two may not be contradictory.
>
> ALBERT CAMUS, *Christian Metaphysics and Neoplatonism*

> Tom laughed uneasily. "Well, maybe like Casy says, a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but on'y a piece of a big one—an' then—"
>
> "Then what, Tom?"
>
> "Then it don' matter. Then I'll be aroun' in the dark. I'll be ever'where—wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Whenever they's a cop beating up a guy, I'll be there."
>
> TOM JOAD'S FINAL SPEECH IN JOHN STEINBECK'S *The Grapes of Wrath*

> On a deeper level my experience is your experience.
>
> SRI NISARGADATTA MAHARAJ, *I Am That*

We have seen in the first two chapters how there have always been superhumans among us in both the history of religions and the history of the humanities, even as we have learned over the last few hundred years how to look away from them, deny them. Is this really a problem, though? Should we not simply forget the super now and just focus on the human, as the reasoned humanist or good citizen might well argue?

This is not a rhetorical question, as if I somehow have an easy answer. I appreciate the religious traditions and the ways they have preserved, ritualized, and cultivated memories of the superhuman, even when these experiences are projected outward and so effectively disowned. At least they are preserved and passed on to future generations within a kind of belief-as-true-projection. I also appreciate the humanistic traditions, especially in their fierce criticisms of the injustices of the religions and the endless racisms, sexisms, and ecological stupidities that the religions too often encourage. It is no accident that I call these strong humanist currents "prophetic." Indeed, I think the humanities *are* among our prophets today. This is one reason they are so often rejected by the public. Prophets always are.

But there are endless complexities here. For one, the moral values that the humanities-as-prophets now profess show every historical sign of possessing deep religious grounds that require all sorts of ontological commitments, most of them originally theological. My language of "prophets" is intentional. What *do* we do with this deeper history? We can go on for some time, I suppose, creating technologies to get clean water or health care to populations that need them, but, really, if we are operating within a completely materialistic framework, why *should* one person care about another? Why do this? Human history is hardly encouraging here, and nature itself has obliterated nearly all the species that have ever lived on the planet. If we are nothing but social animals on a dying planet with nothing and no one beyond us, why care? *Why be good?*

One of the most learned representatives of the humanities as a whole in the last few decades has been the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, the author of three big books on Hegel, the construction of the modern self, and the rules of the secular age and its "immanent frame," respectively. Perhaps more than anyone, Taylor has traced and exposed in the second book the three deep roots of the modern Western world and its multiple moralities: (1) the theistic grounding of the medieval and early modern worlds; (2) the disengaged reason and naturalism of the Enlightenment and now modern science (which is also the basic structure of philosophical humanism); and (3) what he calls "Romantic expressivism," or all the ways that subjective fulfillment is valued and pursued in art, poetry, and literature and finds new expressions in American figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman and the human potential movement of the counterculture, which he names.

The key here is that Taylor, not unlike Richard Shweder, sees the goods of modern moralities as *plural*, and as necessarily so. It is not about one or the other. It is about all three. Moreover, he is very critical of what he calls the "cardinal mistake" of denying any particular moral good (theism, scientific reason, Romantic spirituality) because it can lead to suffering and destruction. Followed alone to its extreme, each, of course, can and does: "Above all, we have to avoid the error of declaring those goods invalid whose exclusive pursuit leads to contemptible or disastrous consequences."[1]

The point, then, is to be more intellectually capacious and morally generous, and to see each of these three historical formations as moral goods that are layered into our contemporary subjectivities and so cut through our cultures and persons in ways that defy any neat ordering or staging. The idea is to embrace all three *together* and to allow them to be in ten-

sion, correcting and challenging but never denying or erasing one another. Taken alone, any of these epistemologies can easily become intolerant, destructive, or paranoid.

Here is Taylor's argument in his own words:

> The goods may be in conflict, but for all that they don't refute each other. The dignity which attaches to disengaged reason is not invalidated when we see how expressive fulfilment or ecological responsibility has been savaged in its name. Close and patient articulation of the goods which underpin different spiritual families in our time tends, I believe, to make their claims more palpable. The trouble with most of the views that I consider inadequate, and that I want to define mine in contrast to here, is that their sympathies are too narrow. They find their way through the dilemmas of modernity by invalidating some of the crucial goods in context.[2]

In the end, Taylor argues that only "moral sources *outside* the subject" will be truly adequate, and that both the abstract objectivisms of the sciences, which disenchant and drain the world of all real meaning, and the subjectivisms of secularism and modern psychology, which similarly disenchant and can carry no shared meaning, will fail us.[3] What we need now are "new languages of personal resonance to make crucial human goods alive for us again."[4] Basically, we need a new religious sensibility with real ontological depth.

Taylor does not hide his own inclinations, but neither does he insist on these. Indeed, he spends over five hundred pages elaborately tracing (through what feels like the entire traditional canon of the humanities) and then affirming the three major moral goods of the modern self before he shares with readers, on the very last page no less, his own "large element of hope" in Judeo-Christian theism, "however terrible the record of its adherents in history." His hope? This theistic tradition's "central promise of a divine affirmation of the human, more total than humans can ever attain unaided."[5]

I am not against Taylor's theistic path forward, which, please note, *also* embraces scientific reason and Romantic spirituality. I am not an atheist (although I am not a traditional theist, either), and I truly admire science. Moreover, as the present chapter will make clear, I am deeply engaged with the Christian tradition as a seeking intellectual who still wears monastic robes at every graduation. But it also remains true that I am a comparativist at heart, and that, because of this, my own specific answers to the dilemmas of modernity are more informed by Asian sources (and I can assure

the reader that Taylor's implied theology of grace is in no way limited to Christians). Accordingly, my answers are somewhat different than Taylor's, if hardly exclusive of his. I do not reject his answers. They are simply too local for me.

I, too, for example, want very much to affirm Taylor's argument that moral goods are *plural*, and that the abuses of any one of them does not in any way invalidate that moral good. As I have long put the matter, *a badly used idea is not the same thing as a bad idea*. Why is this so hard to understand? Why do people keep making the cardinal mistake of assuming that, if an idea is used badly, it must be a bad idea? What important idea has *not* been used badly?

I want to affirm and embrace both the super and the human, regardless of the facts that (a) the super and the human are defined and experienced very differently in different historical contexts, and (b) any such conception of the super and any such conception of the human can seldom be put together in any sustainable way. Things can go wrong, terribly wrong, but the super and the human remain both real and important, and they are almost certainly connected if, as the mystical traditions claim over and over again, the world is truly and really One. Indeed, if the super and the human are both lived dimensions of the actual universe, how could they *not* be connected in such a One World?

I quoted some remarkable lines from John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) to begin this chapter.[6] Certainly, Tom Joad's "maybe" in his final speech is the thought experiment of this book: "maybe . . . a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but on'y a piece of a big one—an' then—"

We are at that "an' then." We are at the place in my argument where I imagine that it might yet be possible to affirm participation in some kind of eternal cosmic reality *and* to fight for social justice in the here and now, to affirm simultaneously the super and the human and so actualize the superhuman. Or, in Tom's simple language, to realize one's own deeper nature as "a big one" and fight against poverty, hunger, and police brutality.

Sound familiar? If John Steinbeck can imagine such a possibility in a novel about rural poverty and hunger, environmental disaster (the Dust Bowl of Oklahoma), economic collapse (the Great Depression), and labor rights, why cannot we do something similar to fight our own present-day sufferings? Why not call on the super, "the big one," to right the human and rebalance our cultures, our politics, and our planet?

Again, I want to admit and emphasize that it is certainly not obvious that we can. Or that we should. We cannot avoid or work around the moral objections to the super. It is perfectly true that institutions that have preserved the superhuman (called religions) have also claimed absolute authority, even infallibility, and that this in turn has undergirded and encouraged endless authoritarianisms, violences, colonialisms, racisms, sexual violences, destructive and completely unnecessary guilt around sexuality, and full-scale genocides.

But a central part of my superhumanities project is to observe the endless ways that the superhuman is not necessarily tied to the religions at all, even if I also want to be honest and recognize that it is precisely in the history of religions where these visions were first born and cultivated. That is how we got to super. It is *not* where we must go from here. It is up to us, not the gods, or God, or whatever we have chosen in the past to enact and so make real.

WHAT I MEAN BY THE HUMAN AS TWO

My own long process of working through the understandable doubts, emotional resistances, and just criticisms of the humanities with respect to the superhuman is encoded in a four-word poem: the Human as Two. By such a phrase, I do not mean something simplistic, as in "there are two things that make up a human being: a soul and a body." I am not what the philosophers call a substance dualist. My intentions are much more paradoxical, allusive, plural, and open-ended. I mean something like this: The human being can know reality in two very different ways: (1) in common everyday indirect ways through the senses, social interaction, language, and the kinesthetic and cognitive capacities of the human body-brain—that is, through the embodied and grammared social self; and (2) in more direct ways, outside or to the side of the senses, the culture, and the body-brain through rare but real revelations of consciousness, which appear in these moments *not* to be restricted to the socialized body-brain but distributed throughout, if not identical with or the source of, the larger biocosmic environment, *which is alive*.

Because this idea is so fundamental to the superhumanities as I am imagining them in this book, it seems important to define—though that is not the right word—the Human as Two more fully, as I have done elsewhere through the contemporary philosophy of mind and physics (SB 197–204). Allow me two other rhetorical routes here—German idealist philosophy and American popular culture, neither of which, admittedly,

fully captures what I want to say but each of which constitutes another attempt to get at what finally *cannot be gotten at*.

I confess that both the fury and the fullness of the Human as Two are largely unavailable to me as a relatively privileged social ego and an oh-so-finite biological organism. But that is as it should be, as it must be, given what the poetic phrase actually encodes—an apophatic anthropology, that is, a double vision of the human that fully recognizes and affirms all that can be said and understood with our present modes of knowledge (humanistic, social scientific, and scientific) but also recognizes and affirms a basic unsaying (*apo-phasis*) or supernature that can *never* be fully said, much less understood and defined. The thesis is intentionally and permanently *open*.

First, the German idealist philosopher. In the abstract thought of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), what I am calling the Human as Two is constituted by the subject/object split of and as ordinary human experience—*a split, however, that can be transcended in extraordinary human (or nonhuman) experience.* Such an epistemological split simply names what we all ordinarily experience—a subject "in here" sensing, perceiving, and cognizing a set of objects "out there." This split can be transcended because it is not finally reflective of reality as it really is; it is not true in the sense that it does not correspond to what is actually so, outside and beyond our normal cognitive and sensorial capacities that organize, define, and so construct almost everything (but not everything) of the human condition.

For Schopenhauer, whereas the subject is the seat of all cognition but can never be cognized itself, the external objects (including and especially human bodies) are in fact cognized, always as "representations" in the field of knowing by such a subject. Drawing deeply on the earlier work of Immanuel Kant and his insistence that space, time, and causality are functions of human knowing and are not features of reality itself, Schopenhauer could write: "There are two essential, necessary and inseparable halves to the world as representation. . . . The first is the *object*, whose form is space and time, and thus multiplicity. The other half, however, is the subject, which does not lie in ether space or time because it is present complete and undivided in each representing being."[7] This epistemological split between a subject and its objects, along with its attending Kantian suspicions, constitutes the most basic meaning of what I intend by the phrase the Human as Two.

We are still in the realm of ordinary representation here, though. In Kant, we can never escape or transcend that ordinariness (hence he is still embraced, or just assumed, in the academy). In Schopenhauer, we can

(hence he is mostly ignored). For Schopenhauer, after all, before or beyond both of these human halves lies a truth that he describes as "very serious and alarming, if not terrifying": that "the world is my will."[8] Hence the doubled title of his magnum opus, *The World as Will and Representation*.

Why the felt terror? Because the individual is constituted entirely by a relative world of representations to and as itself and so *does not exist* on the level of the cosmic will. Basically, the social self fears the awakening of the will because it senses, quite correctly, that it is finally *not*.

This nonexistence of the ego is announced not just by the natural emotional response of fear but also by the irruption of what we today call "paranormal" phenomena that collapse the same subject/object distinction and so signal the eventual deconstruction of the self and its attending social field. Schopenhauer, of course, did not write of the paranormal. In *The World as Will and Representation*, he used contemporary German phrases like "magnetic clairvoyance" (*magnetischen Hellsehn*) or "animal magnetism" (*thierischen Magnetismus*).[9] In a late and long appreciative, really awed, essay, he used expressions like "spirit seeing," "second sight," and a "Second Self."[10]

Astonishingly, he also fully acknowledged that such cultivated capacities are identical to what earlier generations had called magic. He linked this "clairvoyance" to the natural world and the evolutionary processes (not named as such, of course) that produced, in order, the plants, the animal kingdom, and finally the human species. He even described his own precise precognitive dreaming of a banal, entirely "accidental" event (an ink spill) that played out, in perfect detail, the next day, which he flatly described as "dreaming the real" (*Wahrträumen*).[11]

These magnetic fascinations were not some minor side interests of the philosopher, some temporary weakness or late eccentricity that we should overlook for the sake of academic respectability. This was no youthful mistake. *This was a mature conclusion*. For Schopenhauer, clairvoyance and magnetic phenomena give solid witness to the truth of his idealist philosophy, and his idealist philosophy best explains the data of clairvoyance and second sight or precognition. They implied, supported one another. Take the precognized or dreamed ink spill. Such a dreaming, he argued, can penetrate into the future, *which already exists*, since temporality itself exists only on the level of representations (in essence, the brain creates the illusion of time), not on the level of the cosmic will, which exists entirely outside of space, time, and causality (a radicalized Kant again).

Indeed, Schopenhauer believed that these magnetic or magical phenomena should lie at the very heart of the philosophical project. He was

convinced that such "extremely marvellous and positively incredible" clairvoyant phenomena were "incomparably the most important of all the facts that are presented to us by the whole of experience."[12] (Sit with that.) As a result, he felt utter exasperation at those who refused to take these accounts as serious: "Whosever at the present time doubts the facts of animal magnetism and its clairvoyance should be called not a sceptic but an ignoramus."[13] (Sit with that.)

I am making a similar case here (minus the ignoramus) for the humanities as a whole: if one cannot appreciate and understand paranormal phenomena, then one cannot appreciate and understand what a human being is—a superhuman, that is, a human being who is (and is not) a human being. The apophatic anthropology again.

Here is how Schopenhauer summarized the philosophical reasons for the emotional impact of such events (and why, I presume, they are so irrationally resisted to this day): "It seems that some alteration has taken place without a cause, or a dead person has returned, or the past or the future are somehow present in another way, or the distant is near. This sort of thing gives people a tremendous fright because they are thrown into sudden confusion over the forms of cognition of appearances, which is the only thing keeping their own individuality separate from the rest of the world."[14]

To put it my own way, the ordinary subject/object split is simply not finally true; individuality is *not* separate from the rest of the world; a more fundamental nonhuman or superhuman consciousness lies present and active outside or to the side (para-normal) as this split's or individual's deeper origin and source point; and anomalous phenomena signal, symbolize, or express this ontological or biocosmic truth, which is neither entirely local nor strictly historical but, yes, always expressed in the relative terms of place and time.

It is this same double truth about ordinary and extraordinary experience, about the human and the nonhuman, that I intend to convey by the phrase the Human as Two. The key, though, to what I am calling the superhuman is that the Human as Two includes and embraces *both* levels: both the subject/object representations of our ordinary, constructed, and determined individual historical and embodied experience *and* that which is beyond all representation and embodiment and so not fully constructed (and which we thus fear).

In this same doubled context, it is important to observe that what Schopenhauer called the "inner being of the world" can never be discovered by looking at human subjects or material objects, including human

bodies (which, after all, produce one another). This means that the conventional humanities, with their strict focus on the constructions and differences of human subjectivity and embodiment, and the sciences, with their exclusive focus on material objects and mathematized processes, are both finally inadequate to the fullness of the living world.

A focus on the mutually producing subject or object cannot *in principle* reveal the nature of things. Why? Because the secret truth of the world is "not to be sought in them but outside of them."[15] It can only be found in the cosmic will. What is finally required is a direct and immediate knowledge that "we are no longer the individual . . . [that] we continue to exist only as the *one* eye of the world that gazes out from all cognizing creatures."[16]

Accordingly, for Schopenhauer, "we must learn to understand nature from ourselves, not ourselves from nature."[17] That is to say, we must recognize that our will, our consciousness, our deepest subjectivity is the very will, consciousness, or subjectivity of nature coming to know itself; that this consciousness is what the external world *is*; and so, consequently, our best and surest pathway to understanding the nature of reality is through this same will or consciousness. In effect, we must begin with consciousness and work out from there, from the inside out, and not from the outside in, which is what we have been doing for four hundred years now to so much muddle and meaninglessness (but lots of cool, if extremely dangerous and destructive, stuff). Similarly, I have asserted that we must flip, turn outside in, our most basic order of knowledge and, with it, our institutions, cultures, sciences, and religions. We must realize ourselves as local, relative embodiments of that One Eye of the World.

Schopenhauer even invokes our familiar image of the chess game to express this revolution of thought. After such a flip, the knowing philosopher "gazes back calmly and smiles back at the phantasm of this world that was once able to move and torment his mind as well, but now stands before him as indifferently as chess pieces after the game is over."[18] This is precisely what results in the intellectual-spiritual importance of mystical states beyond both the subject and its objects, above the chessboard, as it were. These are those rare but real states of genius that have been considered moments of inspiration, "the activity of a superhuman being distinct from the individual himself and which takes possession of the individual only periodically."[19]

The philosopher repeatedly invokes German mystical writers such as Jacob Boehme, Angelus Silesius, and Meister Eckhart, not to mention the "Vedanta philosophy" of India, whose "esoteric doctrines of wisdom" and "complete transcendence of individuality" (philosophically prefigured in

the "myth of the transmigration of the soul") Schopenhauer described as "the greatest gift" of the nineteenth century and bluntly predicted would "change the very foundations of our knowledge and thought."[20]

Again—I cannot repeat this enough, lest I be misunderstood—it is this simultaneous and extensive focus on the endless subject/object representations and this rare but real affirmation of an inside of things and persons that constitutes *the* signature move of the superhumanities. If you remove either dimension, you do not have the superhumanities. *The superhumanities only pop when they are fiercely and unequivocally doubled*. Either that, or you have religion (overprivileging the transcendent) or the conventional humanities and sciences (overprivileging the immanent).

Also, and just as important, *there is no one, singular, or even preferred, way to relate these two human dimensions*. There are countless ways, and each constitutes a differently produced, or conjured, reality and consequent set of values. Each gives us something else. Put philosophically, human plurality is real and radical, but so is our super natural unity.

Allow me now a much quicker second transmission. Enter American pop culture (really counterculture) in the form of the lowly 1970s comic books that I read as a wowed but clueless kid.[21] It is an odd fact: perhaps the shortest and clearest articulation of the Human as Two that I have ever encountered appears as a single page, just five illustrated panels, of a 1973 *Doctor Strange* comic book, itself almost certainly inspired by the extraordinary super-states of psychedelics consumed in that late but pregnant countercultural moment.[22]

Doctor Strange has just tragically killed the Ancient One, his own spiritual mentor. Sick with grief and guilt, Doctor Strange vows to turn away from all things occult. Then it happens. The Ancient One suddenly appears in a tree, in some water, and in and as a rock (talk about ecological) to show his stunned disciple that he is anything but dead, that he has become "one with the universe." Then comes the cosmic punch line, marked with the excessive emboldening, exclamations, and italicization of the popcultural super and its hormone-laced teenage enthusiasms:

> *Hear, Stephen Strange—until now, everyone's* ***universe*** *has been divided* ***into two parts: Himself****. . . and* ***everything else****! But when you destroyed my* ***ego****, you destroyed my conception of* ***self****—and also my conception of what was* ***not*** *myself! "He has* ***hidden*** *part of himself from the* ***outside****, and part of the* ***outside*** *has been hidden from* ***him****." It was true of* ***all*** *of us! I became the first man to* ***completely*** *comprehend how* ***everything is everything****!* ***Filled*** *with that comprehension my* ***mind****—instead of* ***ending****—****BEGAN****!*[23]

I am not the Ancient One (yet), and I certainly have not completely comprehended that "everything is everything," but that is about as close as it gets to what I am trying to say in these much less colorful and unillustrated pages.

Can you hear the Ancient One? Or does the yellowed comic book, or the psychedelics behind it, or the tired trope of yet another dead German man get in your moral way? No worries. We will keep trying, with other voices and other intellectual mediums, few of which are German, male, or psychedelic.

SUPERHUMAN PRECEDENTS IN THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

As chapter 1 makes clear, I have never hidden the inspirations of my thinking, which lie in comparative mystical literature. Much less have I denied the influence of the Christian traditions, particularly their long meditations on the dual nature of Christ, at once fully human and fully divine, even if I have understood such a theological model in heterodox, not orthodox, terms (as applying to *everyone* and not just a single first-century radicalized rabbi).

But such influences have hardly been only Christian, European, or white. Consider the Islamic analogues. Some of the most fascinating streams of medieval Islamic intellectual culture in figures like the Persian intellectuals Ghazzali (1058–1111) and Suhrawardi (1170–1208) have been precisely about integrating rational thinking derived from Greek sources and stunning mystical states of consciousness of God's Unity. Suhrawardi famously called his own integration of these two ways of knowing his "illuminationist" (*ishraqi*) doctrine and located this both-and in two very different human faculties: the mediated rational faculty and the nonmediated intuitive faculty (Ian McGilchrist seven hundred years ago). Significantly, mystical illumination is primary and comes first, and the philosophical project then follows to catch up with the truth that is already known but needs to be systematized and rationalized.[24]

Mehdi Amin Razavi observes that such a "mixture of discursive and illuminationist arguments" or "philosophical gnosis" was central to later Persian intellectual life and Islamic philosophy *for centuries*. Accordingly, he makes this doubled project one of the main themes of his study of Suhrawardi and his School of Illumination and its famous "Science of Light," a science, by the way, that transcends any distinction between imaginal and empirical in the superhumanist ways I have defined above. This, after all, is a Light that is *both* the incorporeal essence of all ancient

wisdom—from Hermes through the Hindus, Persians, Babylonians, Egyptians, and Greeks, to the great Sufis and finally to Suhrawardi himself—*and* the source of physical light, which lies at a far distance from its ultimate transcendent origin. Indeed, for Suhrawardi, material bodies *are* condensed Light.[25]

Even more impactful on my own thinking have been the Hindu and Buddhist traditions and their endless renditions of the Human as Two, coded early on in the ancient Indian image of the human person as two birds sitting on the same tree: one eating and enjoying the fruit, the other just watching. As we have seen, the later Hindu traditions often draw a sharp distinction between the *ahamkara*, or mortal social ego, literally, the "I-maker," and the *atman*, or immortal "Self," the Witness behind the ego. Similarly, the Buddhist traditions make a clear distinction between conventional truth (*samvritti*), in which the constructed (and nonexistent) social self plays an exceptionally large role, and ultimate truth (*paramartha*), defined by an emptiness in which there is no social self and so no suffering. Not unlike Nietzsche's two floors of the same house again.

It is through these ancient models of our doubleness that I read and understand the prophetic dimensions of the humanities—our very recent psychoanalysis, feminist theory, critical race theory, postcolonial theory, queer theory, and ecocriticism. This is so important to understand. That is why I have dedicated an entire chapter, this one, to this double conviction before we get to the critical theories in the next and last chapter.

Both poles of the Human as Two are perfectly true, and they do not always cooperate or achieve integration. In other words, even if I have long affirmed this twoness, I have also always stood in strong solidarity with those who see some serious problems with it, particularly when it comes to relating the super and the human in social or moral ways. This very suspicion has been an especially acute question in my own historical materials, ethnographic encounters, and teaching, which has included mentoring the children of charismatic spiritual teachers and speaking to the North American gurus themselves about these same patterns.[26]

As is well known by scholars who work within the North American guru traditions, this problem is often displayed in some of its most difficult and acute forms: electric gurus, lamas, healers, and roshis enlightening or awakening their disciples, often with a single touch or glance (or appearing in a precognitive dream), but also sometimes, *and at the same time*, emotionally or sexually abusing them. The believing devotees and disciples too often want to deny the abuse. The secular critics too often want to deny the spiritual transformations. *Both* are seeing half of the picture.

Both are committing Taylor's cardinal mistake of denying a moral good when it goes wrong.

But the problem of charismatic authority is only the beginning. Can we not simply admit the profoundly positive altered states of mind and energy that routinely manifest in obviously amoral or immoral contexts? Think car wrecks, heart attacks, near-drownings, and war, to name just a few. Can we not acknowledge that massive childhood sexual abuse sometimes catalyzes or triggers later ecstatic mystical experience and the revelation of unconditional love? I am thinking of my friend and cowriter, Elizabeth Krohn, whose adult near-death experience and subsequent psychical abilities appear to have been psychospiritually connected to six years of childhood sexual abuse at the hands and body of a male neighborhood babysitter.[27]

The conclusion seems obvious enough: there simply is no necessary relationship between many forms of mystical, ecstatic, and visionary experience and a particular set of ethical norms and social values. They are certainly both true, but they are true in fundamentally different ways: they are functions of *entirely different levels of the human being*—one ultimate and one conventional, as a Buddhist philosopher might say.

This is not to say these two sorts of humanities may not be ultimately connected. The medieval Christian and Buddhist philosophers certainly thought they were—hence their endless writings on, in the Christian case, the unity of the contemplative and active lives or, in the Buddhist case, of emptiness and compassion. Maybe they were right to do so. A figure like Schopenhauer certainly also thought they were ontologically connected. Indeed, he grounded his ethics in the Hindu Sanskrit formula *tat tvam asi* (you are that), which is to say that he grounded his ethics of love and compassion in his mystical affirmation that, ultimately, *there are no ultimate differences between human individuals; it is all the same super-presence, the same One Eye of the World*.[28]

Personally, I find Schopenhauer's idealist ethics attractive (if not always entirely persuasive). Still, the fact remains that these two value systems—one derived from moral and individual concerns "down here" and one derived from mystical experiences of the utter transcendence of the individual "up there"—can also appear separately or independently, or be in serious conflict with one another in a particular figure, movement, or historical moment. That's my point.

One important consequence of my invocation of the Human as Two, seldom recognized, is that the same method implies an appreciation for charismatic spiritual teachers, however imperfect or even abusive they might be as human persons. After all, by affirming the Human as Two,

one can freely acknowledge and even honor mystical experiences on an ontological level without accepting, even condemning the moral behavior or political beliefs of a particular charismatic teacher on a moral or social level. An abusive jerk can be enlightened (and often is). An asshole can know himself as God (and often does). People massacring each other in war can have ecstatic religious experiences (and do).

Once we draw such distinctions, we can be much more sophisticated about how we understand, integrate, and so redeem our own civilizational pasts. We can acknowledge the importance of the super-experiences but not confuse them with the moral behavior and politics of the human beings through whom they happen to be manifesting. We need not conflate the two domains of experience: the mystical and the moral, the ultimate and the conventional. We *should not* conflate the two, even as we should also seek to relate them within a larger metapicture or philosophy of religious experience.

THE ULTIMATE CONSPIRACY THEORY: TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR OWN PART

Let me bring the Human as Two home, into the heart of the academy, to draw the lines in the starkest fashion possible. I do not want to pretend that these thoughts only apply to Hindu gurus and Buddhist roshis, to "them." They do not. They apply to everyone, including European and American intellectuals and professors of the humanities.

Allow me to begin by observing that the Human as Two and its distinction between conventional and ultimate truth is an *epistemological* distinction, that is, it has to do with two different forms of truth or ways of knowing. It is not an ontological distinction; it does not involve any division or duality in reality itself. As best we can tell in the sciences (or in mystical literature), there are relative but no ultimate distinctions in reality: "All is One," to quote the Hermetic tradition again. But most of us never know or encounter this One World and remain on a level of knowing, sensing, thinking, feeling, and relating that is anything but singular or unitive.

It is not just that the Human is Two, then. It is also the case that Truth is Two.

And both kinds of truth—conventional and ultimate—must be respected on their own respective levels. One level cannot be denied for the sake of the other. This is the double key of the whole shebang. If we miss this, we mess up everything. To put the matter in a Nietzschean metaphor, just because Nietzsche is rummaging around upstairs, on the floor above

us, where there is no thought or ordinary experience, does not mean that our own floor down here can be ignored or dismissed. We have to live here. We have to love here. We have to survive and hopefully flourish here.

But at least some of us also want to know about the upper floor, and even the sky above it. Not to acknowledge both forms of truth, pretending that there is only one floor (most conveniently, one's own), and then always insisting that this one particular floor should be deconstructed or taken apart (and it always can be), can have *devastating* social and political consequences.

As indeed it has. Consider, as a potent example, the present crisis of American democracy and the related all-out assault on science, expertise, and professionalism—on truth itself. I do not want to issue any simplistic diagnoses here. There are, no doubt, many reasons for such a crisis, including and especially the media (read: the right-wing propaganda machine of cable news) and the decades-long symbiosis of Evangelical Christianity and the Republican Party (read: the expedient linking of religious fundamentalism, anti-intellectualism, and political conservatism). But there are clearly intellectual roots to the crisis as well, and these have little, if anything, to do with cynical TV personalities, lying politicians, or biblical literalists. Frankly, they have to do with academics.

I would go so far as to say that intellectuals unknowingly laid the foundations for the present crisis and its assault on truth in the 1970s and 1980s with what we now call postmodern thought. The academy has since moved beyond anything written in those decades; in some sense postmodernism is now a straw man, an empty category, an earlier era's obsession. I do not want to make too much of that once all-defining system of thought and value here.

Still, the latter complex of ideas continues to have relevance and continues to influence, mostly because these authors persuasively deconstructed any and all truth statements on a conventional level, exposing them for what they are: historical constructions built up over time through grammar and social practice—linguistic games, as it were. Postmodern critics did this, moreover, in a way that (a) subtly or explicitly called into question the sciences (which are, after all, social and linguistic practices as well) and (b) denied, erased, or simply ignored any ultimate level or universal dimension of truth that might be known and advanced by human beings in nonscientific contexts (particularly religious ones).

Truth was not Two or One. Truth was None. There was certainly no deeper ultimate foundation of things to be known beyond or after the deconstructions. An ironic attitude of raised eyebrows, sly cleverness, anti-

religious animus, and knowing condescension were the marks of supposed intelligence now. Certainly, any belief or firm conviction in something that grounded all values was looked down on (with eyebrows still raised).

The postmodern intellectuals essentially took half of Nietzsche, the famous naysayer, and ignored the other half, the ecstatic and deified yea-sayer. There was no floor above us anymore, much less a shared sky where difference itself makes no sense. There was just *this* floor. And its furniture and walls, even the floor itself, could easily be shown to be what they always are: constructions put together out of previous parts and pieces. In the end, we were living in, and on, nothing at all. We were suspended in midair.

The end result was that the humanities became the ultimate conspiracy theory. What Eve Sedgwick calls "paranoid readings" became the dominant ones. There could no longer be "reparative readings," which is what the queer theorist was really after.[29] Humanists now could *only* suspect, *only* critique, *only* advance yet another reduction of literature, art, or religion to oppressive society, conservative politics, and bad morality.

The problem was, and still is, that all these suspicions, critiques, and reductions are perfectly plausible, and no doubt largely correct (and that is what sets them far apart from any present politicized or media-driven conspiracy theory) but also never sufficient or adequate. Such reductions and deconstructions, after all, could never explain why humans around the world for all of human history have found religion, art, and now literature so attractive, powerful, even beautiful. They could only say what is wrong with these pursuits and expressions, never what is right.

This may not have been what the most sophisticated founders of these methods consciously intended. Edward Said, for example, was subtle, nuanced, and fair when he wrote a long foreword to Raymond Schwab's *The Oriental Renaissance*, a large book on the early modern, centuries-long influx of Asian texts, ideas, beliefs, and art forms into European culture that fundamentally reshaped so many thinkers and artists. The literary critic pointed out Schwab's "integral humanism" that saw East and West not as competitors but as complementary; described this masterwork as "a marvelous prose-poem meditation"; and observed with much admiration Schwab's thesis that this Oriental Renaissance coincided with the birth of Romanticism, indeed that "Schwab's textual odyssey furnishes the necessary first material" for just this Romantic revolution in Europe. Said finally cites with obvious approval "Schwab's happy phrase" about how this Oriental Renaissance "multiplied the world."[30]

It did.

True to form, the conventional humanities have more or less ignored the mystical, ecstatic, and profoundly non-Western dimensions of this Oriental Renaissance of Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist thought and experience in Europe and the United States, which continued right into the global psychedelic countercultures of the 1960s and 1970s to create what is easily the most immediate and relevant origin point of the contemporary humanities. Instead, the conventional humanities have chosen to focus almost entirely on the negative, violent, and colonial dimensions of these same centuries, an approach that was classically articulated and announced by Said in his much-read and much-cited *Orientalism* (1978). It was in this way that Schwab's ecstatic and learned Oriental Renaissance was reduced to Said's Orientalism. It was in this way that the truth became depressing.

As a result, almost everyone today speaks of (depressing) truths, never of (ecstatic) Truth. Ethics is fine. Mystics are not. In short, this sole emphasis on the nay and this utter neglect of the yea was *certainly* the long-term effect or result of postmodern thought, whatever the founders themselves thought or intended (and I personally doubt very much that Derrida, Foucault, and Said are innocent here—they, too, after all, were expressions of the ideologies, sexual practices, and sociopolitical constructions they were unwinding). Truth and knowledge became mirages for deeper dynamics of power, grammatical oppression, and colonial domination and violence. Suspicion was the only recognized intellectual virtue. Hope and affirmation were seen as simply more suspected forms power, oppression, and domination, if not an obvious amoral dilettantism.

I will say it again. *None of this implies that such theories are not persuasive or useful on their own level or in their own terms*. They are all true (on a conventional level). Their basic fault is imagining that they are each *entirely* true or *sufficiently* true (on an absolute level) so that there are no other truths to be had, or none worth having anyway. They imagine that truth is entirely conventional, that it exists entirely on a social or cognitive level, and that they, of course, have it. They are on the chessboard, which is all that exists.

I think this postmodern deconstruction of truth played in turn into the rise of the various falsehoods, projections, and conspiracy theories that came to define the Trump presidency. If, after all, there is no stable truth, if all truth can be deconstructed as coded expressions of power, then, or so the implicit argument goes, *anything goes*, anything can be true, and any "alternative facts" can be used to take and then retain power. That is what truth is, after all: power. So the reverse is also the case. Power is truth.

Complete lies become the norm now, since what is true in a conventional sense (that is, in a representative or factual sense) no longer matters. All that matters is power.

Isn't that what truth is?

You might think I am exaggerating. I wish I were. Basically, what happened is that the right-wing political activists learned just enough postmodern thought to use it very badly, and to call into question the most basic of conventional facts: that there was a pandemic raging, which was not a hoax; that the environment was warming and collapsing because of human activity, including and especially US economic activity; that the 2020 election was won, handedly, by the Democratic candidate in the most successful turnout on record; and so on. It got so bad that many now believed that Democratic politicians were eating babies.

Yes, it got *that* bad.

TO CONFRONT GREATNESS (AND SEXUAL VIOLATIONS): GNOSIS, SEX, AND LSD

There are other ways that the Human as Two can be brought into the academy with frankness and transparency.

One major humanist intellectual who expressed the Human as Two in an especially clear and direct way was the late Yale literary critic Harold Bloom. Indeed, Bloom employed the Human as Two as a basic hermeneutical principle in the humanities—in his case, the study of English literature. I have treated Bloom's academic gnosticism elsewhere to conclude a discussion of my own.[31] I continue to think of Bloom's body of work as exemplary for the sheer breadth of its scholarship but also for the way it clearly recognizes the Human as Two and uses such a doubled anthropology to advance a particular style of humanist scholarship.

Not that many can hear him. For multiple reasons, Bloom understood himself as a "solitary voice, ignored by academic audiences who should—but never will—listen."[32] But his gnostic experiences and consequent readerly habits are certainly at the center of these resistances to the academic norm, even and especially when they are denied or not heard at all.

Bloom employed his own self-confessed gnosis as a key to his aesthetic readings of figures like Blake, Coleridge, Shelley, Wordsworth, and Kafka, all of whom enjoy fairly stable positions in the Western canon. By gnosis, Bloom refers to the ancient category of mystical experience among early Jews, Christians, and pagans *and* to a mode of consciousness available to anyone anywhere, including the contemporary critic, that grants such a

person a special, rare, and elite view into things, including into literature and religion. Such a gnosis is defined by an intimate experience of a deeper subjectivity or Self within the person—a "divine spark," to use the mythical language—that cannot be reduced or explained by any external measure, culture, or religion and is essentially divine, a piece and parcel of God, as Emerson (one of Bloom's favorite authors) had it.

The Human is Two.

As Bloom put it in his study of Franz Kafka, who was after what Kafka himself called a "new Kabbalah"—a modern Jewish gnosticism: "Gnosis, by definition, is a timeless knowledge, both of the self within the self and of the alien God whose spark remains in that innermost self."[33] In another context, Bloom will define gnosis as "not a believing that, a trusting in, or a submission. Rather, it is a mutual knowing, and a simultaneous being known, of and by God." (We are back to Spinoza, the excommunicated Jewish intellectual of Amsterdam and his most bold "intellectual love of God"). Gnosis, for Bloom, is the realization that "the self's potential as power involves the self's immortality, not as duration but as awakening to a knowledge of something in the self that cannot die, because it was never born."[34]

This is *radical* stuff, especially for someone who spent a half century teaching literature at Yale University. And Bloom means it. For Bloom, reading is no purely secular act of casual entertainment. Nor, however, should it be a moral practice of social protest designed to uncover invisible networks of power, desire, and oppression, as it is for so much of the humanities today. Indeed, Bloom is infamously critical of those schools of thought—feminist, Marxist, Black critical, and queer—that read literary works primarily as coded expressions of political subjection and identity formation. "Ranting against cant," as Bloom acidly put it, he calls these critics as a group the "School of Resentment" and believes that they have essentially undermined, or just ruined, departments of English in the United States. For Bloom, literature is no longer read as literature in this School of Resentment.[35] It is read as a coded expression of white men to advance various ideologies around class, race, gender, and sexuality.

This is the main reason Bloom is so hated today in the academy, when he is read at all. Still, I do not read Bloom as denying the relative truth of such ways of reading. I read him as insisting that these are partial truths that erase and deny other truths, which can be quite profound and quite positive, and which are often fundamentally gnostic in nature. I read him as an angrier Charles Taylor writing about the "cardinal mistake" of denying all moral goods for the sake of one moral good.

In Bloom's readerly mind anyway, social justice causes and moral resentment are simply not what great literature is about. Reading canonical literature is an expensive and elite solitary act with an essentially spiritual purpose. Indeed, the aesthetic experience for Bloom is a gloss on the gnostic experience, which is also an experience of actual transcendence: "I think that the self, in its quest to be free and solitary, ultimately reads with one aim only: to confront greatness. That confrontation scarcely masks the desire to join greatness, which is the basis of the aesthetic experience once called the Sublime: the quest for a transcendence of limits."[36] It is within this same spirit that Bloom can observe, "Time, which destroys us, reduces what is not genius to rubbish." This is why, in the words of Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen's gloss on Bloom now, "criticism at its best is a form of wisdom literature—signposts to the divinity in our all-too-human humanity."[37]

It is crucially important to understand that Bloom's aesthetic gnosis carries its own *profound* suspicions, even its open atheism vis-à-vis what most people think of as God. It, too, is a radical form of "resentment," to use Bloom's own language (against him). This, after all, is no intellectual orientation devoid of a sense of human suffering, even evil. Quite the opposite. As an American Jew who lost multiple ancestors in the Holocaust, Bloom personally knew the horrors of anti-Semitism and genocide. Hence, again, his attraction to the gnostic aesthetic:

> You don't have to be Jewish to be oppressed by the enormity of the German slaughter of European Jewry, but if you have lost your four grandparents and most of your uncles, aunts, and cousins in the Holocaust, then you will be a touch more sensitive to the normative Judaic, Christian, and Muslim teachings that God is both all-powerful and benign. That gives one a God who tolerated the Holocaust, and such a god is simply intolerable, since he must be either crazy or irresponsible if his benign omnipotence was compatible with the death camps. A cosmos this obscene, a nature that contains schizophrenia is acceptable to the monotheistic orthodox as part of "the mystery of faith." Historical Gnosticism, as far as I can surmise, was invented by the Jews of the first century of the Common Era as a protest against just such a mystery of faith which, as Emily Dickinson wrote, "bleats to understand."[38]

These are not the words of a shy, retiring, or politically unconcerned intellectual, much less of an ideologue hiding some implicit Nazi or fascist agenda. They are words of fury, nausea, and disgust. In their invo-

cation of the sheep and an obvious disgust with religious authority and its herd mentality, they also sound remarkably like the words of Friedrich Nietzsche. And no wonder. As Ratner-Rosenhagen put it so succinctly, "When Harold Bloom thought about Harold Bloom, or about the dynamics of aesthetic creation, he thought about Nietzsche."[39]

But does any of this really help us with the sexual harassment accusations leveled against the Yale professor? I am thinking here of Naomi Wolf's sexual assault charges advanced against the scholar: According to Wolf, in 1983, "Professor Harold Bloom did something banal, human, and destructive: He put his hand on a student's inner thigh—a student whom he was tasked with teaching and grading. The student was me, a 20-year-old senior at Yale."[40] It was at a dinner party, and the result was a young Wolf vomiting in the kitchen sink, Bloom rushing out of the apartment, coat and bottle of sherry in hand, and the student soon losing her faith in her own academic institution, which protected the famous man and not its now famous alumna.

Given my distinction between the moral and the mystical advanced above, Wolf's charges, which I believe, only serve to confirm and deepen my own convictions about the Human as Two: the mystical and the moral are independent dimensions and need not have anything to do with each other. I seriously doubt they do here, however one wishes to judge the case.

Even if we knew all the details from both sides, and even if we chose to side with Wolf over Bloom, it would not somehow follow that we should then reject Bloom's gnostic aesthetic because of this. *Both* moral goods (justice and gnosis) can be true. That is my point again. One can affirm gnostic transcendence *and* insist on moral and sexual justice, and precisely because the Human is epistemologically Two and not one. We can stand up for justice *and* gnosis and even assert that they are ontologically connected, even when they are split or separated in a particular historical case. We need not deny one good for the sake of the other.

I am certain many of my colleagues will hesitate here, or simply reject my argument out of hand. But *why*? Why reject a figure like Harold Bloom and not, say, a figure like Michel Foucault? Foucault, after all, has recently been charged by the French American intellectual Guy Sorman with far more serious and extensive sexual crimes than Harold Bloom—basically using his white French status to have sex with young Tunisian boys in a dark cemetery.[41] This is a double moral charge, because it also displays clear "Orientalist" dimensions, to employ Said's famous language.

And there is far more surrounding evidence here. A hand on an inner thigh of an undergraduate student, withdrawn at protest, is simply not the

same thing as multiple sexual acts with boys in a graveyard. There is very good textual evidence, moreover, that links Foucault's intellectual ideas directly to his moral acts, which makes them all apiece. Indeed, one of his major biographers, James Miller, has argued, "Virtually everything that Foucault wrote was part of an effort to understand who he was, and who he might yet become, in part through an inquiry into 'limit experience,' undertaken both in theory and in practice."[42]

In a similar spirit, discussions of the charges demonstrate convincingly how the philosopher's books, his life, his acts (including his signing of a petition to lower the legal age of consent in France to as low as thirteen[43]), and the memories of his friends all lend considerable weight to the same conclusion: that Michel Foucault had sex with boys. No victims have come forward, and such charges (which are exactly the kinds of legal measures Foucault wrote against) remain unproven. But they ring true to what we know and suspect, and, above all, they make sense in the larger context of Foucault's life and body of work.

So should we now cancel Michel Foucault with a critique honed and developed by Michel Foucault? Should the woke erase their own greatest theorist, inspiration, and beacon? Once we collapse knowledge and identity, ideas and personality, knowledge and power, what else exactly *could* be done? But where does that leave us? The whole thing threatens to collapse on itself in patent self-contradiction.

The problem with Foucault is that there is no obvious way out of this contradiction, and precisely because he did *not* think the Human is Two. It was all about self-fashioning and sexual experimentation, not ego transcendence into some greater shared dimension of consciousness outside the moral and political realm. He is caught in the grip of his philosophy's own total immanence. Accordingly, it is difficult to avoid the thought that Foucault's famous work on the fundamental plasticity and nonnormativity of human sexuality and gender are related to his public positions on the legal age of sexual consent or, frankly, his likely sex with boys in Tunisia. It is difficult to avoid the thought that *Foucault's own morally and legally transgressive sexuality helped inspire and produce his astonishing body of work*.

At some points, Foucault's life attempts (but finally fails) to transcend the Foucauldian work, outshine it. Consider Foucault's "limit experiences." Early in his career, Foucault was an ardent anti-humanist who wrote against the idea of the human as a historical construction whose historical genealogy could and should be unwound. The human was something that should be ended or erased, not affirmed and furthered into the future (as Nietzsche had clearly done, for example).

Then came California. Foucault found French society much too staid and conservative, but late in life he loved California, the Bay Area of Berkeley and San Francisco in particular. He especially loved the S-M nightclubs of the city, where he could experiment with his embodied identity and refashion, or transcend, his subjectivity through intense sexual pleasures. Here, in the darkness and the ecstasy, burned some of the erotic sources of his late "technologies of the self."

It was not just the hyper-erotic nightclubs, though. The great philosopher also sought out personal transformations through meditation and the teachings of the Asian religions. He was especially drawn to Zen Buddhism through the writings of D. T. Suzuki and Alan Watts, both countercultural icons (who are commonly dismissed as "popularizers" by snarky academics who reject the mystical experiences out of which or about which these two men wrote so powerfully). Foucault even took two trips to Japan, where, on the second, he dialogued with an important Zen master about the end of politics and appeared to embrace a hidden Hegelian dialectic of history.[44] Foucault also had what we can easily recognize as a near-death experience while being run over by a car near his home in France—an experience that he described as "a very intense pleasure" and "one of his best memories."[45]

But it was probably LSD that functioned as the ultimate technology of the self. The philosopher took the powerful human-made molecule with two gay friends, Simeon Wade and the pianist Michael Stoneman, in the ancient lake bed desert of Death Valley in the spring of 1975. Wade was a superhumanist. He considered the molecule "a heavenly elixir, a digestible philosopher's stone, which has the potential of increasing astronomically the power of the brain; enchantment."[46] He gave it to his intellectual idol so that he "might produce an intellectual power approaching the wonders of science fiction, something on the order of Dr. Morbius in *Forbidden Planet*, or the Galaxy Being from the first episode of *The Outer Limits*."[47] Indeed, alluding to the latter television series again, Wade spoke of Foucault's bald skull as suggestive that "an extraordinary cerebral mutation, something of the order of a supermind, had emerged from the outer limits."[48]

Wade's superhuman intentions aside, the bold experiment did in fact change much for the great intellectual, as extreme or anomalous experiences are wont to do to humanists. In letters that can easily be accessed now, Foucault scrawled, in rough English—on University of California, Berkeley, letterhead no less—that the trip was a "great experience, one of the most important in my life."[49] Indeed, if we are to believe Wade, "by the morning, he was crying and proclaiming that he knew Truth."[50]

I cannot think of a less Foucauldian capitalized claim. By "the Truth," Foucault did not mean anything mystical (he in fact resists the word in Wade's fuller account) but some kind of *savoir* or *vérité* manifested in limit experiences, be they sexual encounters with a stranger, hallucinogenic, or alcohol-inspired.[51] Actually, here in Foucault's (or Wade's) use of "the Truth," I think is *the* difference between the humanities and the superhumanities. When Wade, for example, asks Foucault if he had had a mystical experience like Paul's encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus or the Buddha's enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree, Foucault *completely* misses the spiritual aspect of the question and talks about revealing his homosexuality as a youth in the École normale and the disciplinary measures that ensued, thus setting him on his intellectual path.[52] He does something similar with the psychedelic trip in the desert, turning a potential mystical opening into yet another perspective on himself and his own sexuality.[53] In short, Foucault collapses the ontological into his usual and entirely immanent social discourse of normalization, discipline, language, and sexuality. He remained caught.

Whatever we believe (and I am quite certain most of my colleagues will not believe Wade, although he *was* there and they were not), it seems beyond doubt that this psychedelic opening had real and important effects on Foucault. According to Wade, Foucault would now trash his completed second volume and radically rethink the entire trajectory of his *A History of Sexuality* series, which comprises some of the most important and influential texts of the second half of the twentieth century in the academic world.[54]

No longer was Michel Foucault quite as much an anti-humanist who was all about the "death of the subject" (that dreary phrase of the French). Quite the opposite: now he was hymning new "technologies of the self," that is, new, and very old, ways to produce other forms of subjectivity. Nor was he quite so concerned with what his European tradition had long called political "revolution"—social and political fixes to the human condition. He wanted the state to govern less, not more. He himself wanted no revolution.[55] He wanted freedom. Mitchell Dean and Daniel Zamora describe the late Foucault this way: "After his California experiences, and exposure to the 'Californian cult of the self', however, Foucault's subject becomes a free one, an active agent capable of making itself through spiritual and physical exercises, such as people in the West might seek through mediation and yoga, therapy and 'self-help', and with the potential for radical self-transformation through extreme experiences."[56]

Still, there was no real transcendence, no Other to the Human as Two, as there so clearly was for Harold Bloom and his gnostic Self. The Human was just one, and, finally, none at all. At the very end of Wade's book, Foucault explains in an airport that he does not think of himself as a "person," much less as a "human."[57] He was only what he could freely fashion. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion: Michel Foucault did not know the superhuman, and Harold Bloom did.

I have often described to colleagues my own work in books like *Authors of the Impossible* on the discursive aspects of paranormal phenomena (they behave like texts) and the potential paranormal aspects of texts (they can catalyze hauntings, precognitions, and endless telepathic, even poltergeist phenomena)—the real writing us writing the real (SB 228–60)—as "Foucault on steroids." I mean that. I am thinking here of particular gnomic phrases of the philosopher, such as, "We are what has been said."[58] He meant that quite literally. I mean it more so, up to the point where we can actually float off the ground and know (from) the future *because we say we can*. I wish my comments and concerns above to be read in this admiring but critical light.

ON THE CHRISTIAN ORIGINS OF THE SUPERNATURAL

Allow me to shift attention and address a different topic, one especially relevant to the basic anthropological structure and Euro-American expression of the Human as Two.

It would be tempting to conclude from our present circumstances that the most reasonable way forward is to reject any and all forms of religion, particularly and especially Christianity, debased fundamentalist and politicized forms of which obviously helped produce the present political crises in the United States. This rejection of Christianity is what large segments of the American public are doing, particularly among the younger generations, as the professional polls continue to show and my own undergraduate students tell me again and again. Their basic disgust with the hateful intolerance of fundamentalist forms of Christianity are obvious and telling.

I understand all of that and have, indeed, spent much of my professional life writing about that immense swath of the global public now called the "spiritual but not religious."[59] Moreover, as the above discussion

makes clear, I read a central humanist figure like Nietzsche in a similar spiritual-but-not-religious light and affirm much the same myself. As a social ego, I *am* this.

But there is the point: to *affirm*. We have tried the secular no-answer now for a century or so. It didn't work. Closing our eyes to our own deep religious histories does little other than make us walk into walls. Moreover, walking away from a serious philosophical grappling with religious issues might feel safe enough, but it gives that ground away to some dangerous ideologues. It is time to try another way forward—one that is much more positive, engaged, and, above all, affirming of the human spiritual impulses, including those on clear, if confused, display in the Christian traditions.

I feel the same way about US politics. The biggest mistake the Democratic Party ever made was refusing to engage the Christian churches *in religious terms*. The historical Jesus was hardly a gun-toting Republican who privileged the rich, despised the outcast, and railed against abortion and homosexuality. Quite the opposite. He preached against the rich and for the poor, renounced violence and weapons, and said nothing at all about abortion and homosexuality. Moreover, and most telling, the gospel textual facts that he infamously hung out with female sex workers (who were certainly performing dangerous abortions and engaging in sex acts of all sorts) and encouraged his closest male disciples to castrate (or feminize) themselves renders the present conservative Christian positions on abortion and queer sexualities nearly ridiculous (SB 37–45). There is even some evidence that Jesus may have engaged in sexual contact with younger men, a possibility signaled by a laconic passage in the Gospel of Mark (14:51–52), which describes a young man wearing only a linen cloth in the garden of Gethsemane with Jesus on the night of his famous arrest.[60] There is so much here liberal political voices could embrace, take back, and complexify, if only they would.

And is it not patently obvious? Christian belief and practice, including and especially Christian Gnostic belief and practice, are all about the superhuman and, more specifically, about the relationship between the super part and the human part. This is what a Christian theologian would call Christology, the branch of Christian thought concerned with defining and relating "the two natures of Christ" as "fully human" and "fully divine." Or, as Dante's *Purgatorio* had it in the late medieval Italian language and culture that originally gave us the "human" (*l'umana*): *e in una persona essa e l'umana*, "and in one person human and divine."[61]

Not that every Christian tradition has landed in that orthodox both-

and, in that "one person human and divine." Some of today's more liberal and secularized traditions have emphasized the human part to the near total eclipse of the super part. Others have done the opposite, sometimes nearly eclipsing the human part for the sake of the super part.

Consider a single Russian Orthodox example, M. V. Lodyzhenskii. The writer penned a trilogy of books. Significantly, the first volume was titled *Super-Consciousness and Paths to Its Acquisition* (1906). The "superconsciousness" (*sverkh-soznaniye*) is probably Lodyzhenskii's most important category. It is a "higher reason" that resides in the heart, not in the head and its "lower reason"; is latent or potential in every human; is activated through extreme ascetic practice that silences the lower cognitive functions of the mind; results in parapsychological phenomena like clairvoyance and telepathy; and is the true spiritual locus of union with the Godhead and the "mystical contemplation of divine powers."[62]

The second volume, *Light Invisible* (1912), argues for a clear preference for the highly ascetic spirituality of the Russian Orthodox staretz, spiritual father, and saint Seraphim of Sarov (born Prochorus Moshnin, 1759–1833) over the all-too-human piety of the Italian Roman Catholic Francis of Assisi (1181–1226). Francis's earthy views of the life of Jesus and especially his subsequent psychosomatic stigmata, in imitation of the crucified Christ, are seen as obvious marks of a lesser, fleshier form of Christian mysticism, one simply not up to the high spiritual standards of Seraphim.

Seraphim *was* impressive, and in ways that collapse the empirical and the imaginal in true superhuman fashion. Consider this first-person account from Nicholas Motovilov:

> Then I looked at the Staretz and was panic-stricken. Picture, in the sun's orb, in the most dazzling brightness of its noon-day shining, the face of a man who is talking to you. You see his lips moving, the expressions in his eyes, you hear his voice, you feel his arms round your shoulders, and yet you see neither his arms, nor his body, nor his face, you lose all sense of yourself, you can see only the blinding light which spreads everywhere, lighting up the layer of snow covering the glade, and igniting the flakes that are falling on us both like white powder.[63]

Such a shimmering light show in the falling snow cannot be fully remembered in today's academy. It must have been some kind of subjective illusion.

What we might well call the specter of Christianity in the modern world is even more haunting when we realize that it was this same tradition that

bestowed on our present culture an especially powerful and especially persistent *super-* word, the *supernatural*.

The category of the supernatural was formed in the middle of the thirteenth century within the elite halls of medieval Latin theology.[64] Robert Bartlett notes that not a single instance of the word *supernatural* (*supernaturalis*) can be found before the middle of the thirteenth century, and that it was the greatest academic of the day, Thomas Aquinas, who brought the supernatural, as a new word now, into the theological vocabulary.[65] (Sit with that.) Not that it was yet common. The word entered the European vernaculars, first in French, over a century later, in 1375, and then in English around the middle of the fifteenth century.[66]

The story is fascinating. As Bartlett tells it, it was medieval hagiography—the remembered, documented, and eventually legally debated lives of the saints (read: superhumans)—that really made the supernatural necessary.

Roman Catholicism, it is often said, is the only religion that puts its saints on trial. There is real truth in that. There is also real truth in the claim, or just observation, that this same tradition possesses the best documentation of superhumans anywhere on the planet. As Herbert Thurston noted: "If we are in search of marvels, no class of materials is so worthy of study as the records of Catholic mysticism."[67] I might personally differ with the tradition's theological assessment of such marvels (Thurston certainly did), but the fact remains that this particular tradition's archival investment is simply remarkable. Some of the oldest and best historical deposits of the superhuman lie in the vaults of the Vatican archives.

The extraordinary phenomena that eventually gave rise to the supernatural were certainly not new in the thirteenth century. The supernatural as the miracle was already central to the New Testament, where, in the Gospel of John, for example, Jesus's healing miracles and exorcisms were consistently told and employed as signs (*semeia*) of both Jesus's divinity and the effective arrival of the kingdom of God.

The textual truth is that the Jesus of the gospels is a figure whom Morton Smith once called "Jesus the magician" but whom today we might call a "paranormal prodigy."[68] Accordingly, he does things like effectively curse and kill a (perfectly innocent) fig tree, use his own spittle to heal blindness (shamans do that), clairvoyantly access information from a distance, telepathically read other people's hearts and minds, and precognitively see future events. The ultimate miracle, of course, was the central New Testament event of the resurrection and Jesus's numerous postmortem appearances, without which there simply would be no Christianity.

And it was not just Jesus the miracle worker, exorcist, magician, or res-

urrected body. *Pace* the academic reception history of Paul and the Pauline letters, the miraculous was also absolutely central to the preaching, imprisonment, and travels of the Jewish apostle as well. Paul was also a miracle worker or Jewish magician endowed with significant occult powers, particularly in Luke and Acts. The early history of Christianity similarly depended heavily on the manifestation of the miraculous, on the *charismata*, or "gifts," of the Spirit, even if these were culturally coded quite differently. Here, as the story was told in the New Testament, is what Graham Twelftree calls "a powerful energy" that exploded in "signs, wonders, and miracles" (*semeia*, *terata*, and *dunameis*), as described in Paul's letters to the Corinthians.[69] (Recall from an earlier discussion that today these *charismata* are coded in the sociology of religion in and as the central category of "charisma.")

Craig S. Keener wrote two immense volumes trying to come to terms with the comparative credibility of the New Testament miracle accounts and their obvious relationship to various "superhuman" figures and "paranormal" healing stories in the ancient world, but also in the modern world.[70] Fully conscious and honestly confessional about his own theistic framework, Keener's is a rare but robust argument that supernatural explanations, or the active presence of "intelligent, suprahuman causation," though hardly persuasive in every case, should not be taken off the academic table in a dogmatic fashion.[71] His compassionate, critical, but nonexclusive approach to religious phenomena such as shamanism, healing stories, even resurrection accounts in other societies and religions is remarkable. Not surprisingly, it is here, in a focused comparative lens, that he often finds the strongest evidence for taking the local New Testament accounts seriously. *Comparison affirms*.

Things did not end with the New Testament. We might also say that the super definitively entered early Christianity as the Greek adjective *hyper-* employed by a sixth-century writer who remains unidentified but is today known as Dionysius the Areopagite. Significantly, it was this same Dionysius who gave us the technical expression and techniques of mystical theology (*mystike theologia*), "a dialectical view of the relation of God and the world that was the fountained of speculative mystical systems for at least a thousand years," as the historian of Christian mysticism Bernard McGinn explains.[72] By "dialectical," McGinn means a constant back-and-forth, a denial of every affirmative statement, an "unsaying" (*apo-phasis*) of every saying, since the Godhead is a "divine darkness" and a "being beyond all being" that cannot be known conceptually or in *any* cultural code.

As it turns out, the prefix *hyper-* ("beyond," or in its classical Latin trans-

lation, "super") functions in this same mystical theology as the prefix of choice, really as the logic and movement of the entire Dionysian apophatic project. Hence classic Dionysian terms such as "beyond being" or "super-essential" (*hyperousios*), "superessentially" (*hyperousios*), "beyond having" (*hyperechon*), "beyond unknowing" (*hyperagnoston*), and "superunitary" (*hyperenomenos*).[73] The Latin prefix *super-* is the privileged adjective for the divine, not because it explains the divine, as in "a whole lot," but because it does not, as in "beyond this." The super here points beyond any human conception or understanding to a fundamental unknowing or not-knowing (*agnosia*) that is the surest expression of such a mystical theology. Indeed, McGinn goes so far as to describe the ancient form of mystical theology as "the knowledge (or, better, 'super-knowledge') that deals with the mystery of God in himself, the *mone* [the One]."[74]

The historian of early Christianity Charles M. Stang encourages us to see such a super-knowledge as aimed at the "total transformation of the Christian subject"—a transformation, moreover, that reveals a fundamental twoness, an "apophatic anthropology," as in *apo-phasis*, a "saying away." Stang captures this sense of the human as both human and divine in the Pauline subtitle of his first book: *No Longer I*. The conscious "I" or social self is important, but it is not who we all are or will be. Or, as Stang has it in the singular title of his second book on the larger Mediterranean world and first few centuries of the Common Era, this is *Our Divine Double*.[75] The Human is Two.

It is of some significance that, for Dionysius, as in the great Neoplatonic authors who preceded him (especially Plotinus, who wrote of a *nous eron*, or "erotic intellect"), it is *eros* (a spiritually awakened form of sexual desire that is no longer attached to a sexual object or person) that drives the mystical process forward and upward. *Eros*, in other words, is no simple biological instinct or natural force. It is inherently, metaphysically, cosmic and divine. This, for Dionysius, is the "real Eros" (*to ontos eros* or *alethes eros*).[76] Indeed, in this early Christian-Neoplatonic context, it is *eros* that constitutes and drives the great circular emanation or flow that is the "procession from" (*prohodos*) and "return to" (*epistrophe*) the transcendent Godhead or One, which—particularly since Plotinus—paradoxically always also remains in itself. Here is a fairly typical passage (note the use of the super, evident even in translation): "It must be said that the very cause of the universe in the beautiful, good superabundance of his benign yearning for all is carried outside of himself in the loving care he has for everything. He is, as it were, beguiled by goodness, by love (*agape*) and by yearning (*eros*) and is enticed away from his dwelling place and comes to

abide within all things, and he does so by virtue of his supernatural and ecstatic capacity to remain, nevertheless, within himself."[77]

It was this same Neoplatonic grammar of unsaying and erotic procession and return that became the lingua franca of Christian, Jewish, and Islamic mystical literature. There is no way to overemphasize the influence. The mystical traditions of all three great monotheisms would be profoundly shaped by these dialectical, apophatic, and erotic methods from here on. And the prefix *super-*, first in the Greek, then in the Latin, was the key.

The medieval European Christian world, whose monastic *schola* (schools) gave rise to what eventually became our scholars and modern universities, had some very different concerns and anxieties. Among these was the practical question of who could and could not be considered a saint and so become an established model for the faithful and their devotions.

By the high medieval period, of course, Christianity was no longer a tiny upstart Jewish movement in threat of extinction and under constant if sporadic persecution. It was now Christendom, an entire civilizational complex. Who could and could not represent the civilization mattered a great deal. It also mattered *financially*, particularly since the bodies (and body parts) of saints, otherwise known as relics, established particular towns, cities, and churches as places of major pilgrimage, rituals, and pious devotions of all kinds.[78]

The problem was partly a moral one. Exceptionally strange and uncanny things and signs, wonders, and marvels of all kinds happened around all sorts of people (and they still do), not all of whom embodied the virtues or preached the beliefs so prized by the priests and bishops. In fact, the moral status of the person in question did not seem to matter much. How to mark one off from the other, the saintly from the sinful, so as to preserve the boundaries and understandings of the holy faith? This is where the supernatural was very useful—as a boundary marker.

Intellectuals began to speculate that, yes, weird and marvelous things could happen around anyone, but these were not necessarily from God—that is, they did not necessarily issue from outside the natural order and so from a divine agent. They were not necessarily *praeter naturam*, or "beyond nature," as one famous academic, Peter Lombard, put it.[79]

Only those miracles (*miracula*) that were truly supernatural (*supernaturalis*) or issued from "above-the-natural," that is, from God, could be considered reliable marks of a holy person.[80] All else potentially issued from the natural world, or worse (the demonic readings were never far behind).

Medieval tradition would call the neutral natural anomalies wonders (*mirabilia*) and the more suspect and likely demonic ones magic (*magicus*). Catholic tradition would invent yet other Latin coinages for phenomena that were strange but entirely natural, if somehow always suspect, for example, natural magic and, later, the preternatural. There was also harmful magic (*malefici*) and the association between witches (*strigae*) and prostitutes.[81]

There's a surprise.

What really came to define the official recognition of sainthood, then, was not the anomalous taken alone (although that was crucial, too) but the anomalous that could not be traced to any natural cause and, moreover, that was accompanied by orthodox belief and correct moral behavior (and no sex). It was these three *together* that allowed one to be considered a potential saint—considered, that is, by the Roman papacy and its lawyers. Again, it was very much about authority and tradition, not about the phenomena themselves.

Obviously, this was no simple thing to determine. And so the Church eventually set up a legal process and elaborate research processes to document and critically assess the ethnographic, autobiographical, literary, and medical evidence of this and that extraordinary event and person.

Probably no single modern writer about these historical deposits is more relevant to our present discussion than the English Jesuit priest, hagiographer, and psychical researcher Herbert Thurston (1856–1939), whose *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism* (1952) remains to this day unmatched in scope and theoretical sophistication. Thurston was a member of the Bollandists, a special Catholic association of intellectuals (named after the Flemish Jesuit Jean Bolland) that specializes in the study of the *Acta Sanctorum*, the Acts (or Lives) of the Saints. Significantly, Thurston was also an active member of the Society for Psychical Research in London.

In the terms of my own coinages, Herbert Thurston was a hero of both the superhumanities and the New Comparativism (SB 359–75). Not only was he an accomplished Latinist—that is, an erudite humanist—but as a superhumanist, he also fully acknowledged the extensive anomalous phenomena of Catholic history, really of *all* human history, including secular or nonreligious cases.[82] Most importantly, he took the present cases, including the non-Catholic ones, to think about and theorize in new ways the past saintly ones. As a new comparativist, he wrote about these present and past cases *together* in a kind of double mirror.

This is what really came to define much of Catholic sanctity and so inspired and shaped Catholic history for the Jesuit—the *physical* phenom-

ena of mysticism. The list of such phenomena that order the book's chapters challenges almost anyone's boggle threshold: levitation, stigmata, and telekinesis (particularly with eucharistic hosts); "human salamanders" (bodies unaffected by extreme heat); bodily elongation; luminous or energetic effects around individuals, including the "fire of love" (*incendium amoris*), often of a highly erotic nature and sometimes of a seemingly physical or even "human torch" quality;[83] clairvoyance or, as it is known today in more secular contexts, "remote viewing"; "odours of sanctity," or perfume-like smells sensed in the environment; blood prodigies (relics magically bleeding at certain times of the year); a kind of paranormal seeing without the eyes; living without eating; and, in true Jesus fashion, the multiplication of food.

It is not just his researched descriptions of such human marvels that make Thurston's book so important. It is his keen sense that what earlier eras considered supernatural bears a clear, if still mysterious, relationship to various symptomatic natural expressions that we now know more about through modern psychiatry and abnormal psychology. In essence, *our present limited knowledge corrects our past limited knowledge and renders our understanding more humane, inclusive, and compassionate*. Thurston's book

> aims at illustrating the difficulty of assigning precise limits to the range of those natural but unusual manifestations of man's spiritual being which science now takes account of under the name of abnormal psychology. Two centuries ago such phenomena were summarily dismissed, by Catholics and Protestants alike, as witchcraft, sorcery, or, in brief, the work of the devil. But this was before the reality of the hypnotic trance was recognized, and before attention was thus directed to possibilities of which earlier ages had no conception. We are somewhat wiser now.[84]

In the end, Thurston refuses to draw "a clear line of demarcation between the merely abnormal and the miraculous or supernatural."[85] That is because *there is no such line*, unless we are acting as a religious authority, a secular debunker, or an academic gatekeeper. That so-called demarcation line is in our heads and our institutions of power, not in the world outside those heads and political structures.

The other feature of Thurston's interpretive style worth highlighting here is his honest assessment of the moral or ethical dimension of the physical phenomena. Once again, *there is none*. Such marvels are simply of another order and have nothing necessarily to do with the moral state of the individual in question. This was already encoded in the canonical legal

process, but Thurston incorporates the same Catholic wisdom directly into his historiography. The perfume-like smells of the saints, for example, were no sign of holiness for the Jesuit. Bluntly, "they named it badly."[86] Such mysterious odors are known as well among modern mediums and Spiritualists, after all, and such mediums are no holier than anyone else, Thurston observes. They are simply more porous, more open, less fixed.

It is really quite impossible to capture the wonders, twists, turns, traumas, and joys of this four-hundred-page masterwork. Allow me to say just a few words about one of Thurston's major case studies to convey some sense of the book and the argument. The case of Francis of Assisi—you know, the guy in your (or your neighbor's) garden talking to the birds—was, in historical fact, one of the earliest legal-theological cases that helped generate and popularize the theological category of the supernatural. Indeed, one of the earliest instances of the Latin *supernaturalis* appeared in *The Life of Francis*, written by Bonaventure a few years after Francis died.[87] In other words, the historical genesis of the supernatural and the mystical-physical phenomena that was Francis of Assisi were both historically and conceptually linked.

It is not difficult to see why. This man's experiences were *phenomenal*, and probably eventually deadly. You can go to Assisi and think similar thoughts. I did. There, behind a glass case, you can get very close to the saint's blood-caked tube socks, kept carefully to this day in a sacred reliquary box—*blood* (and so DNA) from the wounds in his feet that Francis is said to have suffered from contact with some kind of object in the sky. The burning thing beamed into him, blasted him, *pierced* his body in multiple places, including his hands, feet, and side.

This is one of the earliest, maybe the earliest, and certainly most influential cases of the stigmata, that is, the wounds of Christ re-created in the body of Francis, often modeled after a local piece of art (hence the stigmatic wounds usually appear in the palms instead of the bonier wrists, which were used in actual Roman crucifixions so the nails would not rip through the flesh and small bones of the hand).

Catholic tradition, and the endless murals and frescoes that grace the walls and churches of Assisi and Italy, depicts the object in the sky in different forms, sometimes as a kind of weird angel, or even as Christ on a cross (UFOs are often described as crosses in the sky).[88] With this seraphic or Christological interpretation, and the famous art depicting (and no doubt forming) the phenomenon, we are back to the empirical and the imaginal, the physical and the mystical, the universal and the local fused and focused into a single, literally piercing focus.

After a long survey of all the historical sources, Thurston has little doubt that the stigmata actually happened. What such bleeding wounds *mean*, or how they were psychosomatically or spiritually generated, is a very different matter. Indeed, he makes much of the fact that we now have at least one case of manufactured stigmata in a hysterical patient. We *know* humans can do this to themselves. Thurston also mentions in passing that there are "fifty or sixty well-attested examples of visible stigmata" over some seven centuries, so we also know that the stigmata are in no way unique to Francis or the early thirteenth century.

We also have to recognize that there are other interpretations of the phenomena, even within the Christian tradition. I can only imagine what my evangelical neighbors here in Texas might say or, for that matter, the Lutheran pastor in my hometown. Some of my Protestant friends over the years have been positively *creeped out* by the stigmata, which is now a motif in horror movies. Having seen the bloody socks, I get that. Whatever this thing was, it certainly did not help keep the man alive. It helped kill him.

FROM TRANSHUMAN TRANSFIGURATION TO THE SPECTER OF CHRISTIANITY

This little historical genealogy of the supernatural leads me to this: *no proposal for the superhumanities can afford to ignore the Christian traditions*. This is the case not because the Christian claims are true and the others are false. Rather, coming to terms with the history of Christianity is important because (a) the historical resources are philosophically provocative and culturally vast; (b) Christian beliefs and values like the supernatural were the bedrock from which the universities, including the sciences, originally emerged in Europe and flourished for centuries; and (c) such religious worldviews continue to define and shape the culture of which higher education is a central expression, including and especially its progressive moral values.

The conclusion follows. If the humanities are going to survive, much less flourish and develop into the superhumanities, their practitioners would be wise to engage and interact, critically *and* positively, with the Christian traditions, both conservative and liberal, both orthodox and heterodox. And I do not mean they should historically describe the Christian traditions or treat them at arm's length. I mean the Christian traditions should be met *on religious, philosophical, even imaginal-empirical grounds* (*think Thurston's "physical phenomena of mysticism," that is, stigmata, levitation, bilocation, and resurrection*).

Take, as a single example, what we have come to call the transhuman—a clear, if somewhat distant relative of the superhuman. It turns out that Seraphim's blindingly bright face is of some relevance here and that the actual historical context of the transhuman gives witness (again) to the disturbing ways that we have shrunk and made small the human.

The transhuman, it turns out, was originally conceived by a famous Christian poet to address the question that cannot be asked, with which I ended the first chapter. The transhuman was first coined by the Italian poet Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), as *trasumanar*, in his classic *Divine Comedy* to capture the postmortem transformation of the physical body, especially the face, of the person (*persona*) as that person passes from moral purgation to the paradisiacal state and enters a much larger community that knows no ultimate separation between the living and the dead. Here is Heather Webb on the key term:

> The souls we meet in *Purgatorio* are working towards a state of being "transhuman," a state that souls in *Paradiso* have already achieved. For Dante, the transhuman has little or nothing to do with the integration of the human subject into animal, plant, mechanical, or mineral entities that many of our contemporary trans- and post-humanisms currently promote. . . . Dante's *trasumanar* suggests instead the possibility of fully integrating the human person into an ethically grounded copresence with other individuals in a network of relations based on mutual recognition and interpersonal attention that transcend the boundary that separates the living from the dead.[89]

This process was linked in turn to the outshining phenomena of the spiritually transfigured body, as witnessed, for example, by the disciples during the Transfiguration according to the gospel writer (Matthew 17:3), a textual event that was also, please note, a kind of transhistorical conversation with "dead" prophets—in this case, Jesus with Moses and Elias. The transhuman, in short, originally referenced a transmortal potentiality of infinite connectedness and relatedness with both the living and the dead and a literally enlightened body and face. Seraphim's face in the falling snow shone for a reason.

This, of course, raises the haunting question of what to do with theism, with God. I am not a Nietzschean, as I explained on the first pages of this book. To speak theologically for a moment, I do not think God has to die so that superhumans can live. I think superhumans can live because there

is a God who cannot die but is born nonetheless as us. "God" is idealism for the masses. It is not exactly true, but it is true enough.

But this does not mean that I think the present images and understandings of God are adequate. I think they are largely understandable projections, ways to distance ourselves from ourselves and yet participate vicariously in what we believe. Belief is safe distance. Belief is true projection. I also think that such images are mostly much too local and exclusive, if not actually ethnocentric. One does not need Christian theology or a Russian Orthodox saint, after all, to get glowing bodies and explosions of light—such phenomena can be found throughout the history of religions and into today, including something often called the "death flash," a burst of light often seen or sensed by witnesses around the body of a dying person.

I recall here a scholarly conference I once attended at Columbia University.[90] I remember paper after paper positively engaging every cultural practice and belief, however obviously "exotic" they might have been to the group's secular standards. Then we arrived at the subject of hearing voices in charismatic Evangelical Christianity. Suddenly, the reception turned cold and subtly negative. The Stanford anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann, who presented the material and has since written about the Evangelical tradition with great power and persuasion, took her elite audience to task for their obvious hypocrisy and clear double standard.[91] It was all very professional and subtly coded, but Luhrmann spoke the truth. I cheered silently inside.

It did not surprise me, but it did delight me, when I later learned that Luhrmann had had her own impossible experience in England (and not with Christians). In her own words, "I was sitting in a commuter train to London the first time I felt supernatural power rip through me" (there is that *super-* word again). Significantly, this occurred while she was reading a book of magical comparison composed by a modern magical adept. Luhrmann explained what happened in her column for the *New York Times*:

> I was 23, and one year into my graduate training in anthropology. I had decided to do my fieldwork among educated white Britons who practiced what they called magic. The book's language was dense and abstract, and my mind kept slipping as I struggled to grasp what he was talking about. The text spoke of the Holy Spirit and Tibetan masters and an ancient system of Judaic mysticism called kabbalah. The author wrote that all these

> were just names for forces that flowed from a higher spiritual reality into this one, through the vehicle of the trained mind. And as I strained to imagine what the author thought it would be like to be that vehicle, I began to feel power in my veins—to really feel it, not to imagine it. I grew hot. I became completely alert, more awake than I usually am, and I felt so alive. It seemed that power coursed through me like water through a chute. I wanted to sing. And then wisps of smoke came out of my backpack, in which I had tossed my bicycle lights. One of them was melting.[92]

Once again, the imaginal and the empirical were working in tandem, corresponding, flashing through a human body and melting a bike light at the same time.

I want to follow Luhrmann's example here. I want to model her eventual turn to the Christian traditions, including evangelical and charismatic ones with their heavy emphasis on the many miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit (*charismata*), as a most apt and important focus of social scientific (charisma) and humanistic concern. Indeed, I want to end this chapter on, of all things, the central paranormal event of Christian belief and practice—the resurrection of Christ. As it turns out, this particular story includes a significant precognitive dream, one that signaled the professional rescue of the intellectual who dreamed it and so also all the classrooms, students, lectures, books, and essays that would follow. This is a near-perfect example of the superhumanities in the life and work of a single person.

But first, allow me to explain how and why intellectuals first suppressed the super in the heart of the nineteenth-century European academy, in early New Testament criticism itself. It is a long story. I will try to keep it short.

THE NIGHT SIDE OF NATURE AND THE BIRTH OF NEW TESTAMENT CRITICISM

It remains a most remarkable historical irony. No modern scholarly tradition has probably done more to encourage its practitioners to focus on the human part and ignore, or argue away, the super part of our superhumanity than New Testament scholarship. In many ways, New Testament criticism was *born* in just such a splitting and in exactly this denial.

One of the earliest and most gifted scholars of the New Testament was the German biblical critic David Friedrich Strauss (1808–74), a figure, by the way, who helped catalyze Nietzsche's atheism. To read Strauss was to

risk losing one's faith. Early biblical scholarship could be that existentially powerful. It still is.

Predictably (this is how we keep mistelling our story, keeping the truth depressing), Strauss is often invoked today as an iconic figure who definitively enacted the denial and deconstruction of the biblical miracles, which in turn laid the groundwork for modern biblical criticism, much of which has been defined by *precisely* this denial of the anomalous or the miraculous.

This deflating reading of Strauss is a half-truth that is also half wrong. Things are never quite that simple in the humanities, as I hope is obvious by now. Remarkable here was Strauss's critical but deeply sympathetic engagement with what was known at the time as the "nocturnal side of nature"—the magnetic, possession, and demonical phenomena in the countryside of Germany, including those super-phenomena spiking among gifted (mostly female) mystics and mediums whom Strauss knew personally. As he wrote his now canonical *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1835–36) and thought about the miracles of Jesus, some of which he took as plausible features of this same nocturnal nature, he was thinking about these mediumistic women and their astonishing powers, many of which he could not doubt because he had witnessed them himself.[93]

Strauss is generally known as the man who first showed in some definitive manner that the miracles of Christ as recorded in the four gospels were legendary additions and not actual acts of the historical Jesus of Nazareth. Set side by side, the four gospels do not agree. After Strauss, this was fairly easy to show. More seriously still, the miracle stories, which were used by the gospels to establish the authority and teaching of Jesus, supposedly violate nature's established laws and so, obviously, could not have happened as described. Or so the rationalist story goes since the English philosopher David Hume made the argument in a widely read essay titled "Of Miracles" in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Nature* (1748).

But David Strauss was not David Hume. Strauss went through many stages in his struggles with the miracle stories and eventually landed on a position that was hardly simply skeptical, much less Humean. He came to believe, largely because of the aforementioned work with mediums in the German countryside, that many of the healing and demonic possession stories were plausible transformations of actual historical events, mythologized in the gospels in the language of miracle and demon. He did not believe the mythical framework, but he also did not dispute the likelihood that at least some of the miracle stories possessed genuine historical foundations. In short, he took a kind of third position that was neither believ-

ing nor debunking. In his time, this position was framed as Mesmerism or magnetism; today it carries on under the category of the paranormal.

Paranormal phenomena were quite real for Strauss, but they were *not* supernatural (in the medieval sense). They did not issue from somewhere or someone outside the natural order; they were a part of the natural world that we did not yet understand (as if we now understood the "laws" of nature). This is why such phenomena were gathered under the rubrics of "the night side of nature" or the "nocturnal side of science." In terms of the present study, they were superhuman: human and natural but also, obviously, outside our present understandings of the natural order and quite beyond or above the normal capacities of healthy adults. Strauss, by the way, was also of the opinion that severe illness or trauma was what commonly opened up an individual to these nocturnal states and abilities. He knew what I have called the traumatic secret (SB 322–25).

Thomas Fabisiak has given us a powerful study of Strauss along these same super natural lines. His work about "how the spiritual claims and experiences of demoniacs and clairvoyants in the German countryside . . . shaped the fields of scientific and religious discourse that developed in the writings of Strauss" and his subsequent reading of the scholar as "ahead of his time," presenting, already in the 1830s, "a strikingly modern blend of methodological agnosticism and openness to foreign, unsettling phenomena," should be standard reading in our fields.[94] Indeed, Strauss's double position is *still* ahead of our time, defined as our disciplines are by the present ideology of the fields and the faiths and their respective silly binaries: miracles are either baseless legends or literal facts. In the end, Strauss would conclude not so far from where Nietzsche would conclude and where millions upon millions of people would land in the twentieth century: "We must acknowledge that we are no longer Christians . . . although we may still have a religion—the religion of cosmic evolution."[95]

WHEN THE STARS CAME DOWN AND THE BOOK PROPHESIZED

The contemporary New Testament critic Dale C. Allison Jr., who often describes himself in print as a "lifelong churchgoer," is well known in his discipline as an exceptionally rigorous critic of the New Testament and an active and prolific member of the "quest of the historical Jesus" collective, that group of scholars who have labored to tease out what in the gospels is historical, and so might reflect the actual life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, and what is theological, and so might reflect the later memo-

ries and interests of "the Way" (Acts 9:2, 19:9, 19:23, 24:14, 24:22), that is, the early Jesus movement. Allison has written extensively (in over twenty books and edited volumes) about the historical Jesus as an apocalyptic and ascetic preacher, drawing on learned readings of the Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, Syriac, Coptic, and Latin texts as well as the global scholarship written in English, German, and French.[96] He is the scholar's scholar, the humanities embodied in almost perfect form.

Allison, however, has also expressed deep suspicion around the normative assumptions that underlie much of the historical Jesus research, be these religious or secular. He has also spent much of his career arguing, in effect, for what he provocatively calls the "historical Christ," that is, the likely historical experiences and empirical events, including the resurrection and Jesus's own sense of deification, that eventually produced the New Testament texts, claims, and Christian memories.[97]

Allison has also expressed a profound "doubt seeking understanding" about whether historical scholarship (the historical Jesus) really has anything to do with claims of Christian faith (the biblical Christ).[98] Translated into my own terms, Allison's body of work is fundamentally about the relationship, *or not*, between the super and the human. It is about the superhuman. Allison will relate the finite and the infinite, the historical and the theological, for sure, but he will finally leave that relationship open, and he will seriously question whether the infinite becomes the finite in the same way that the finite becomes the infinite.

I would not suggest reading Allison if you want your particular literal Christian beliefs preserved. But I would not suggest reading him if you want your secularism and historicism preserved either. His work occupies a kind of third space that is quite rare among intellectuals but by no means entirely unique in the literatures. What *does* make Allison virtually unique is his rigorous application of this third space to the New Testament materials.

To put an accent on it, there is a certain submerged but active Fortean dimension to Allison's remarkable thought. I am referring to the writings of the American humorist and anomalist researcher Charles Fort (1874–1932), who did more than anyone to map and name that third space, what he called the third Dominant, and which eventually became the American paranormal (accent on the first syllable) through a long century transformation from the French paranormal (accent on the last syllable). Pulp and then science fiction, UFOs, horror movies, and occult romance were some of the results.

I am not guessing here. Dale told me as much. I saw the same when I

read his title essay "Resurrecting Jesus," which, among many other things, argues for the historical plausibility of the New Testament resurrection appearances by demonstrating how close these come to modern parapsychological accounts of individuals encountering dead loved ones, often in full physical form like the gospel narratives.[99] Dale was really and truly "resurrecting Jesus" through such jarring comparisons. He was doing his best to argue for the experiential reality of these postmortem experiences. And he was right. It is simply not true that every appearance of the dead today is a ghost or fuzzy apparitional form—many are perfectly convincing *physical* appearances.

Or transphysical.[100]

I asked Dale if he would consider writing up his thoughts along these lines for an essay that I needed for a handbook series I was directing. The result was a crystallized study on "The Paranormal Jesus" for my *Super Religion* volume. In it, Dale demonstrates in some detail just how central anomalous phenomena are to the New Testament gospels.[101]

Dale has also more recently written a monograph-long study of the resurrection appearances in the New Testament, both in the gospels and in the Pauline letters.[102] This is a book of *massive* erudition around the biblical texts, the real events that may well lie behind them, and how to read these popular New Testament residues. Dale engages the full power and depth of contemporary biblical criticism to show that the scriptural accounts are relatively thin but nevertheless intriguing documents for the responsible historian and can reasonably be read faithfully *or* skeptically.

The originality and importance of the book lies in how Dale turns to other independent literatures to "think in parallels." For example, he engages embarrassingly well-documented and often shockingly bizarre Marian apparitions in recent Roman Catholic history and modern angelic, bereavement, and near-death contacts to compare them to the early New Testament accounts. He does the same with the Tibetan Buddhist "rainbow body," a particularly mind-bending phenomenon in which the physical body of a Tantric Buddhist adept dissolves, or nearly dissolves, after death—often all that is left are a few bones, hairs, fingers, and toenails, or a wildly shrunken body. The comparisons here with the empty tomb seem obvious enough, even if the religious interpretations are entirely different.[103]

Through all such remarkable cross-cultural comparisons (of which there are far more than I have just listed), Dale performs a double refusal to fall into either easy debunking reduction or naive literalist belief. The result is a shocking book that troubles one's certainty, *whatever* that cer-

tainty happens to be, and advances a profound humility before one of the most important mysteries of the history of religions—the resurrection of Christ. It turns out that the questions of what really happened or, more basic still, what a body is are much more complicated than is normally thought *or* believed. Turns out we really do not know.

Now the personal.

I first wrote about Dale anonymously, as "Dan." It was a story about a honey jar that had teleported across a kitchen in broad daylight while the scholar was making blueberry muffins. One moment, the jar was sitting next to the sink, recently washed of its stickiness. The next moment, Dale turned around, walked across the room, and pulled a flour tin off the shelf to complete the recipe. The flour tin immediately became heavy in his surprised hands and dropped to the floor, casting its contents in the process. A flour-caked honey jar, still wet, was inside the flour tin. Dale was shocked. He just sat there on the floor and looked back to the sink. The honey jar was gone. Of course it was gone. It was now in the flour tin. But how?[104]

One of Dale's evangelical friends interpreted the story as proof that the resurrection is true—that God can do anything. That seemed like a stretch to Dale, but this basic belief (or fact) indeed glows somewhere behind the astonished comparisons of his recent book on the miracle of the resurrection. A teleporting honey jar in a Kansas kitchen is not a resurrected body in first-century, Roman-occupied colonial Palestine, but once one loosens one's materialistic grip on reality, pretty much anything can, and does, happen. Open that door, and things get bizarre, *fast*.

Such scenes, it turns out, were not entirely unusual in Dale's life. Or in his family. Or in his wife's family. His son John (who happens to be my graduate student now) related to me a perfect precognitive dream he had at age seven while the family was still living in Wichita, Kansas, in the 1990s. John dreamed of a neighborhood he did not recognize and of a particular girl whom he did not know. Months later, the family moved to Pittsburgh, where John immediately recognized the neighborhood as the same one in his dream. The doorbell rang one day: "I open up the door and there is the girl from my dream who introduces herself as our new neighbor. She says her name is Ellen. I'm shocked and speechless. I embarrass myself by running up the staircase to hide in my bedroom, my heart pounding."

John then breaks into a partial list of what he calls his "cabinet of unfiled things," the family stories: "the cousin who was disallowed to set the dinner table because she kept accidentally bending all the spoons telekinetically; my father being visited by his dead best friend who communi-

cated things to him that only she could know; the grandmother who woke up one night and was faced with an invisible barrier blocking the exit from her bedroom; an uncle whose dead father's voice appeared in his head and asked him to deliver a message; a mother who spontaneously experienced a psychometric reading of a man's watch."[105] And that's before we get to John visiting himself from the future (to comfort his ailing present self) in ways that are eerily similar to Paul Loeb's "backward-willing" interpretation of Friedrich Nietzsche.

As it turns out, Dale Allison's life has been punctured, guided, encouraged, and largely defined by events like those his son lists above. The first involved the stars coming down to him in the middle of Kansas. There is no sense in me paraphrasing this story. It is too important, and Dale can tell it much better. Significantly, he understands this story as the true origin and source point of all that would come later in his life, including and especially the scholarship, much as—no, *exactly as*—I have been arguing in this book.

Here is my thesis in Dale's life and words:

> My meeting with the *mysterium fascinosum* in 1973 is the historical center of my adult life. I have spent my days trying to understand it and all that has flowed from it. It is the existential foundation upon which I have built everything else. It is the source of my deep-seated curiosity about so many religious issues as well as countless affiliated topics. Without that experience, I do not know where I would be today, but my life would not, I am sure, have been the same. Ultimately, then, I am a professor at a seminary not so much because I have the requisite credentials but because the stars came down one night when I was sixteen years old.[106]

Please read that last sentence again. This is the superhumanities in a nutshell: we can simply replace "at a seminary" with any college or university affiliation, or none at all, and "the stars came down one night when I was sixteen years old" with a thousand other altered states of knowledge. *This* is what actually happens, over and over again, not the dry, lifeless, purely rationalist picture that we are asked to believe.

In any case, here is how the stars came down for a teenager named Dale:

> I was sitting by myself on my parents' back porch, under the Kansas night sky. What I was thinking about I fail to remember. I have not, however, forgotten the magical incident that redirected my life. In a moment, and ostensibly without any preparation on my part, the stars were close to

> hand, not far away. Having somehow forsaken the firmament, they were all around me. If not quite animate, they were also not wholly inanimate. These engulfing lights then announced, by what mechanism I know not, the arrival of an overwhelming, powerful presence. This presence was benevolent yet enigmatic, affectionate yet forbidding. It suffused me with a calm ecstasy, a sublime elation, "a genial holy fear" (Coleridge). The experience awakened me from what I then deemed, in retrospect, to have been a lifelong slumber. It electrified awareness and bestowed meaning. Given my cultural context, a word came straightway to mind for this fantastic mystery: God. When the moment had passed—it lasted maybe twenty seconds—I believed that I had run into God, or that God had run into me.

The experience, of course, did not come with its own ready-made interpretation or a particular action plan. That would come later, and only after much reflection, debate, and thinking. Dale begins with a biblical reference to Bethel, the place where Genesis (28:10–22) has Jacob dreaming of angels coming down from the sky:

> My Bethel-like vision left me firmly persuaded that the word "God" refers to something more than optimistic imagination, and further that this something matters in a way nothing else does. These, however, were sheer convictions, bare-boned thoughts. How was I to respond? What was I supposed to do? There was no imperative in my experience. I presently began to speak with others about what had happened. Those who were sympathetic did not hesitate to interpret my experience for me. Jesus, they eagerly and confidently avowed, had saved me from my sins. I had been born again. I had been rescued from the domain of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of God's beloved Son. So from now on I was to live, out of gratitude, a Christian life. I accepted their interpretation, even though I had already been attending a church and saying my prayers, and even though there had been no christological component in my experience (a fact that, curiously, occurred to me only later, after I came to think for myself). Sundays thereafter found me not in my parents' liberal church but in my friends' evangelical church. Those in charge taught me what I should believe about many, many things.

This first evangelical interpretation was a key, because it alone advanced in that particular time and place an explicit and robust model of the Human as Two that the family's liberal Protestant church obviously lacked. No doubt, Jesus was just a remarkably good person here, human

through and through. Later Dale's young family would attend an Eastern Orthodox church in search of more adequate christological resources. And Dale, to this day, has found the rituals and artistic emptiness of Protestantism ineffective, because such traditions do not carry the profound mystery and altered states he had known directly on the Kansas porch and saw indirectly reflected in the Eastern Orthodox beliefs, rituals, and icons.

Still, the evangelical interpretation of the stars coming down would not last (nor would the Eastern Orthodox ones later, by the way—too super, not enough human). There were just too many good questions. There were also insistent high school friends:

> Not all my high-school friends were sympathetic regarding my new zeal. One in particular assailed me with questions. How do you know that anything in that collection of antique stories, the Bible, is historically true? How can you believe in a soul given what we now know about the brain? Is hell not an outdated myth, which sensible people discarded long ago? How can you have faith in the tenets of one religion when there are multiple religions, and when they disagree about so much? These were, to my mind, excellent questions, and I had less than satisfying answers. Soon enough, then, my friend's questions became my questions, his doubts my doubts, his objections my course of study. And with that I began to read. I read evangelical apologists, modern theologians, hostile atheists, and biblical critics. I read philosophers, archaeologists, biologists, scholars of religion, and neuroscientists, as well as parapsychologists and their critics. This is why I decided, when asked, that I would major in philosophy and minor in religion. Why not use college to investigate further the epistemological puzzles and religious quandaries that already consumed me? After that, one thing led to another, and I eventually ended up with a Ph.D. in biblical studies.[107]

Dale received his PhD in 1982, when he was twenty-six years old. He returned home to Wichita hoping that the family business would support him, but it soon failed and his father died, leaving a $14 million debt. The family home was confiscated by the IRS.

Dale began to apply for academic jobs two years later, in 1984. It would take *thirteen years* before he landed a position. He mixed paint in a hardware store. He worked at the front desk of a bookstore. He stitched together part-time adjunct jobs at four different schools (an all-too-familiar scenario for young humanist intellectuals). Dale's wife, Kris, moreover, could not work, since the family had to live in such a bad neighborhood

that the couple decided to homeschool the kids. It was just not safe at the schools. Food baskets from the church would routinely appear on the Allison front porch.

It was *bad*. Dale worried about how to pay for the heating bills when he heard the heat kick on at night. He also contemplated suicide and found the thought attractive. When he coauthored a major three-volume commentary on the Gospel of Matthew with a famous New Testament critic, his own mentor W. D. Davies, he got little credit for it, despite the fact that he had done much of the work (I suspect "almost all of it" is more accurate). For all these reasons, and more, he eventually developed a heart condition.

Dale was nearing his breaking point. In 1997, he decided to apply for one more job. He heard nothing. "My dream was dead. It had died a prolonged, slow death." He could no longer in good conscience keep his family in poverty. He decided to quit. He writes, "But that morning I dreamed a dream. They are the last three pages of *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet*. I didn't write them. The Muses or some part of my unconscious self came up with them. I woke up early with the words all there. I went downstairs, quickly typed them—altering only a word or two—and sent them to a close friend." That would be a happy enough story, but the channeled book dream seemed to signal something far greater, far more impactful. "That afternoon, Pittsburgh called with a job offer. (I was runner up again, but the guy who won asked for too much money.) It's been easy sledding since."[108]

It is my own conviction that Dale's dream of the three pages also functioned as a precognitive intuition of the job offer the next day. Hence the timing, the difficult to miss correspondence between the channeling dream and the job offer.

I should add that Dale himself does not know what to make of what he calls "all this future stuff." My convictions are not his. But it is also true that this was hardly the first of his precognitive experiences (if, indeed, the dreamed three pages constituted such a thing). When I shared a draft of some of my other writing on precognition for feedback and criticism, Dale shared an unpublished essay of his on the déjà vu experience in which he recounts that he *routinely* has déjà vu experiences, up to once a month, and mostly, it turns out, while reading a book (which fits, perfectly again, my argument that paranormal processes are often textual processes, and so the latter can also trigger the former).

He also offers in the same essay his own explanation for at least some of these remembered, repeated, or recognized events, namely, that what

one is remembering when something uncannily familiar happens in a déjà vu experience is a dream of that very thing happening—a precognitive dream. To make his point, he offers his own precognitive dream of trying to fix a float in a toilet, straddled naked over the ceramic bowl, a scene which then played out, *exactly like this*, the next day—hardly an example designed to romanticize a special power.[109]

Dale also sent me an account of one of his first teenage romances in 1974, which took place in the Colorado Rockies. What was so unusual about this innocent tryst was that he had imagined it all two weeks earlier: "The scene that I imagined in my chair was the same scene that I, through circumstances unarranged by me, physically entered two weeks later. It was not just that the elements—Mary, hillside, mountain stream, night sky—were the same. Rather, the appearance and arrangement of those elements were also the same. The hillside and the stream of my fantasy looked like the hillside and stream I later saw with bodily eyes. And my location within the fantasy was the location Mary and I later occupied in reality."[110]

In short, Dale Allison is a precog. I am fairly certain he would deny that supposition, out of humility or out of humor. But I do believe it, even if he does not. In any case, we now have the books and essays of Dale C. Allison Jr., one of the most accomplished and respected New Testament critics presently working in the field. As he himself recognizes, none of this would have happened had the stars not come down one Kansas night. Nor, of course, would it have happened without that first job, which was itself signaled in a precognitively timed dream that also coincidentally (or not) gave him the last three pages of another book on the West's archetypal superhuman, Jesus of Nazareth.

This is how the humanities *really* work. Not always, of course. But often enough to give us serious pause about what exactly we mean when we think, utter, or write that strangest of words: the *human*.

It's not what we think. Nor are we.

4 THEORY AS TWO

Rewriting the Real

> Such an inquiry requires that one be ready to break out of the coercive restraints of Sociological Truth—the axiom that the social is the ground of being.
>
> TALAL ASAD, *Powers of the Secular Modern*

> I argue that the fantastic is not limited to the worlds of literature but goes beyond to form a part of the cultural production of our realities—it is in the very fabric of the everyday. . . . The fantastic is the hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature confronting an apparently supernatural event—it is defined in relation to the real and the imaginary. . . . However, it is not only ghosts and shifted realities that comprise the fantastic. It may also be structures of domination and subordination.
>
> EMILE M. TOWNES, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*

I think the stakes are sufficiently clear now. What remains is for me to show how we can do this thing, how we can rewrite reality itself, and, indeed, have been doing so for some time.

I will proceed through five humanist critical traditions: psychoanalysis, critical race theory, postcolonial theory, queer theory, and ecocriticism. My goal is not to show how the super is ancient and global, how there is an unconscious logic in place that blocks every attempted expression of the superhuman, or how intellectuals might begin to take responsibility for the academy's role in our present crises around meaning and truth and engage more positively with the full range of human experience, *however* fantastic that experience gets. Those were the projects of our first three chapters. My goal, rather, is to show how there is also, and always has been, a countermovement, a vertical standing up from the chessboard with all those black and white battling pieces, how critique itself—theory, as we say—has always been two.

PSYCHOANALYSIS AS TWO: DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS FROM MESMER TO TODAY

We glided too quickly over this story in the brief treatment of Strauss. It is time to tell the story a bit more fully now, if not fully enough.

The psychotherapist Adam Crabtree has demonstrated in detail that modern psychological healing finds its modern origins not in Freud but in the 1784 discovery of "magnetic sleep" (*sommeil magnétique*) and all the "magnetic" practitioners throughout the Western world who followed for over a century. It was Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1851), from whose surname we get the word *mesmerized*, who began this story. His original writings and practices and the "artificially induced somnambulism," a kind of waking sleep that developed out of them, definitively "revealed a realm of mental activity not available to the conscious mind."[1]

There is an understatement. The discovery revealed another side of the human being that possessed the most unbelievable abilities—basically, superpowers—and often of a healing and fantastically positive nature. One of the first people to "discover" them was a French aristocrat named Armand Marie Jacques de Chastenet, Marquis de Puységur (1751–1825), mercifully shortened in the scholarship to Puységur. Following Mesmer, Puységur tried to put a French peasant named Victor Race into what was then called a "healing crisis." Instead, some kind of super-learned being spoke through Victor, someone who not only did not speak in Victor's countryside patois but knew perfectly well what Puységur was thinking. Puységur, to say the least, was deeply impressed, and probably a bit creeped out. He would write of "*un etre que je ne sais pas nommer*" (a being whom I do not know how to name). Enter what would become the common category of double consciousness.

I have described something of these astonishing doubled states elsewhere, mostly through the French sociologist, historian, and philosopher Bertrand Méheust.[2] Here it is enough to observe that these states and abilities were eventually disciplined and effectively suppressed by various official commissions, mostly in France, over the course of the nineteenth century. As a result of this long social pressure and effective censorship, by the end of the century, these same phenomena were being thoroughly naturalized and shrunk into public categories such as "hypnotism," coined by the Manchester physician James Braid, and then Freud's eventual "unconscious," now restricted to the biological organism (such a restriction was not quite complete, as we will see in a moment).

Méheust calls the psychoanalytic unconscious a "buffer concept" (think those huge steel and rubber guards designed to stop an out-of-control commuter train from plowing into the station). By (sort of) dealing with the immensity of the other Self, the being whom no one can name, the psychoanalytic unconscious offered a kind of small brush fire to stop the advance of a much more dangerous and culturally significant poten-

tial conflagration. As a result, categories like the Freudian unconscious effectively prevented Western thought from venturing too far into these strange, bizarre, and alien worlds, where the elite culture was simply not ready to go but in fact had already been with Mesmerism and the magnetic healing movement.

Still, Freud was not the Freud most assume (and have not read, of course). Although the real Freud freely admitted that he had no ears to hear the music of mysticism (he didn't), he much admired, really *adored*, one of the finest intellectual mystics of his generation, the French writer, Nobel laureate, and peace activist Romain Rolland, who *did* know his own extensive mystical states, wrote extensively about comparative mystical literature (in the Hindu figures of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda), and would easily and instantly be classified as "spiritual but not religious," were he alive today.[3] The deep friendship between Sigmund Freud, the atheist psychoanalyst, and Romain Rolland, the secular mystical activist, remains one of most iconic models of what I am trying to convey in these pages. *Together*, not individually, they perform the superhumanities as friends almost perfectly.

The real Freud also routinely encountered anomalous phenomena head-on with his patients, particularly with their dreams. Honest to a fault, he wrote six essays on telepathy, or what he liked to call, in a presumed safer mode, "thought transference" (*Gedankenübertragung*), what is today called, still relatively coded, "unconscious communication" (another obvious buffer concept: he was really talking about telepathy, after all). Freud came to understand thought transference as a genuine phenomenon often encountered in dream interpretation and the mysterious transferences of the psychoanalytic session.

This was not some rare secret or piece of gossip. Even Freud's (horrified) biographer, Ernst Jones, admitted as much, quoting a letter Freud wrote to the British American paranormal researcher Hereward Carrington in 1921, that said, in Jones's account now, "If I had to live my life over again, I should devote myself to psychical research rather than to psychoanalysis."[4] The actual letter of July 24, 1921, was more carefully worded: "I am not one of those who dismiss *a priori* the study of so-called occult psychical phenomena as unscientific, discreditable or even as dangerous. If I were at the beginning rather at the end of a scientific career, as I am today, I might possibly choose just this field of research, in spite of all difficulties."[5] Freud then went on to emphasize his own skeptical and materialist orientation with respect to the occult and observed, rather wryly, that he could not in any way even conceive of the personality's sur-

vival of bodily death. Ultimately, his answer to Carrington was a firm but polite "No."

But the larger historical context of the letter, including the receiver, is significant. Carrington was a well-known paranormal researcher, a stage magician more than familiar with the mechanisms of fraud, and a prolific writer who wrote about subjects such as Tantric kundalini yoga, "cosmic consciousness," occultism, mediumship, and (originally for semiprivate circulation among American Spiritualists) how to develop one's own psychic powers. In short, we do not have to go far from Freud to find the superhumans. They were everywhere, including in Freud's own published work and private correspondence.

And that was just the beginning of the doubled human in psychoanalytic theory. Precisely because all these things *happen*, later therapists, psychiatrists, and intellectuals of a psychoanalytic persuasion continued to encounter these phenomena in their professional work, and they wrote about them with sophistication, nuance, and conviction. Witness books such as Nandor Fodor's *The Unaccountable: A Distinguished Psychoanalyst Traces His Life Work in the Paranormal* (1968) and Jules Eisenbud's *Parapsychology and the Unconscious* (1983).

The psychoanalytic ideas and methods were also reimagined in non-Western contexts, particularly South Asian ones, in the second half of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first by intellectuals like Wendy Doniger, Sudhir Kakar, Gananath Obeyesekere, and Alf Hiltebeitel.[6] Such psychoanalytically informed authors often ventured into extremely nuanced explorations of Hindu and Buddhist ontologies. These thinkers were not reducing South Asian religious worlds to Freudian biological and materialist commitments. They were throwing striking new light onto the psychoanalytic landscape through their interpretive engagements, at once suspicious and trusting, of cultures and religions that Freud knew little, or nothing at all, about. They were using Europe to better understand India and India to better understand Europe.

It is probably Obeyesekere who has come the closest to what I am theorizing as the Human as Two. Two books stand out: *The Work of Culture* (1990), where Obeyesekere develops an entire anthropology between the unconscious ecstatic states of his ethnographic subjects and the public symbols and myths of their religious experiences and expressions, and more fully and autobiographically, *The Awakened Ones* (2012).

The latter book is the anthropologist's very personal late-life reflection on nonrational knowledge and altered states of visionary consciousness

in Buddhist, Hindu, Neoplatonic, Christian, British Romantic (especially Blake), Theosophical, Jungian, and New Age authors. It is a near-perfect expression of what I have theorized as the Human as Two and studied in the lives of humanist scholars of comparative mystical literature, a congruence the author himself recognizes and names on the very first page of the book.[7]

Early in the tome, Obeyesekere describes his project in the philosophical terms of the West: as "a long disquisition on the ways of knowing that bypass the Cartesian cogito and the associated idea that Reason is the only legitimate access to knowledge."[8] This Two is framed in many ways throughout the book, though: as a distinction between ordinary consciousness and "visionary consciousness"; between the ego's "I am" and "spirit" (whose representatives it is not difficult to find "in virtually every religion"[9]); between the ordinary "I" and the "It" of Friedrich Nietzsche; and between the two Enlightenments of which Obeyesekere is a self-confessed historical product, the European and Buddhist ones.

Indeed, Obeyesekere will employ the comparative method to write things like this: "The Christ and Buddha mythos have radically different substantive and salvific meanings, but, on the structural level, they both conform to the model that I sketch here."[10] That "structural level" is the very twoness or superhumanity I am articulating.

Hence Obeyesekere's "insurrection of suppressed knowledge."[11] Such an insurrection or "futuristic neurology" combining the two forms or states of consciousness we have been exploring will insist that the most extravagant mythologies of Buddhism (or any other religion) are not mere fantasies or legends but are rooted in actual human experience. In his own careful words: "I cannot imagine that these accomplishments could have been invented if they were experience-alien."[12] The extravagant mythologies of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas *mean* something, *code* something real and true.

Perhaps the most significant feature of the book is a personal past-life memory of Old Delhi that Obeyesekere relates and poetically refers to at the beginning and at the end as "Intimations of Mortality: The Ethnographer's Dream and the Return of the Vultures." I suspect this is why Obeyesekere insists that even the most imaginally fantastic aspects of Buddhist culture are based on quite genuine human potentials. He is thinking of things like memories of past lives, the bodhisattvas and their psychical powers, and the "treasure texts" of Tibetan Buddhism—that is, future scriptures found lodged in the physical mountains or minds of advanced

practitioners. How could the anthropologist argue otherwise? Just such a state and vision had happened to him, had shaped his very life and work, including his own books.

Such anomalous events have hardly let up today. Nor has the psychoanalytic writing. Consider the feminist psychologist and ethicist Carol Gilligan and the late psychoanalyst Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer. As Mayer tells the story, these two colleagues hosted an annual panel on anomalous phenomena at the American Psychoanalytic Association. With a nod to psychoanalytic convention (more buffer concepts), they called it "Intuition, Unconscious Communication, and Thought Transference." In another attempted safety move, members who wanted to attend the event were required to submit in writing "an apparently anomalous experience, personal or clinical." I suppose Gilligan and Mayer thought this might act like a filter. It didn't. "We were promptly inundated." And the poor conference organizers did not know what to do, except, of course, call Mayer: "Lisby—*do* something! Our office is overwhelmed with calls from people saying they *have* to get into this group. Call me!"[13] The story speaks volumes.

Including Mayer's own. Mayer would go on to write a deeply autobiographical book about her own intellectual engagement with, and experience of, paranormal phenomena, including and especially a dowsing clairvoyant who nailed the location of her daughter's stolen rare harp from across the country. The renowned physicist Freeman Dyson at the Institute for Advanced Study and University Professor Carol Gilligan of New York University again wrote not one but two forewords. You know, your typical fluff.

The story of psychiatrist Diane Hennacy Powell is no less dramatic and powerful. Powell began life as a math prodigy. Her grandmother was a music prodigy. Powell thus knew from the beginning of her life that people could have special powers. Then, while on the faculty of Harvard Medical School, she had a patient who claimed to be psychic. And was. "She . . . told me several accurate details about my life and made specific predictions about my future, all of which eventually came true."[14] Her own response was dramatic. The psychiatrist spent much of the rest of her professional life studying what she calls "evolution and extraordinary human abilities," particularly among autistic children.[15] She still is.

"What is it about autism," Powell asks, "which otherwise severely impairs functioning, but that can lead to such seemingly superhuman abilities?"[16] Her tentative answer involves the known neuroanatomy of the human brain and how these structures mediate knowledge and experience. "In dreaming and autism there is a shift in dominance, so the limbic sys-

tem and sensory cortices are more dominant than the neocortices, and a shift from the usual left brain dominance to right brain dominance. The two shifts are not independent of each other, because increased activity in the limbic system will increase the activity of the intuitive, creative right brain and inhibit the analytical, linear, and logic-based left brain"[17] We are back to Iain McGilchrist. We are also back to the Human as Two—here most literally, anatomically.

To make sense of all this, Powell suggests a model she calls the Möbius mind. The Möbius strip, of course, is a familiar image that is constructed by twisting just once a band or strip whose ends are then joined. The result is a kind of physical paradox whose looped inside becomes its own outside that in turn becomes its own inside. Powell uses the image as an icon of her philosophical argument that the outside of mind is matter and that the inside of matter is mind. The two dimensions cannot be separated. To try to do so is as specious as trying to claim that matter is only wave-like, or only particle-like. Technically speaking, Powell proposes a form of what is sometimes called neutral monism, namely, that "everything may ultimately consist of the same stuff," which can be described as mental or material, depending "upon the level at which you look at it."[18] (This is my own dual-aspect monism differently named.)

In the end, Powell understands her work with psychically gifted autistic children and the larger literatures as "a shift that could become the next evolutionary leap in understanding ourselves and our place in the universe."[19]

Such a shift will not likely come easy. Powell herself paid a heavy price for even writing about it. When her book came out, the Oregon Medical Board revoked her license to practice psychiatry on an emergency basis. She believes the board read only the title of her book: *The ESP Enigma*. But that was enough. She had to spend three days taking an extensive battery of psychological tests and undergo further neurological testing to assure the board that she did not have a brain tumor. Basically, she had to prove her sanity for writing about such things. The tests showed nothing remarkable, except her exceptionally high IQ, which the board decided gave Powell some right to eccentricity. All this, and supportive letters from professional colleagues affirming her mental health and professional integrity, resulted in the board reinstating her license on the grounds of her "normalcy," but only at their next quarterly meeting. In the meantime, the financial and professional costs were significant and immediately devastating, because she had no other way to support herself.

The Canadian analyst and scholar of religion Marsha Hewitt has taken

the conversation right into the heart of the humanities and the study of religion in her *Legacies of the Occult: Psychoanalysis, Religion, and Unconscious Communication*. Hewitt's work is especially important to emphasize for many reasons, including her understanding of psychoanalysis as being all about carefully listening to and finding meaning in expressions of the human psyche that are commonly considered "irrational."[20] Indeed, the specific psychoanalytic framings of the Human as Two that the fundamental category of the unconscious brings and the subsequent interpretive methods of translation that follow are uniquely open-ended and philosophically endless.

This is precisely what Hewitt demonstrates. She shows that the central notion of the unconscious, which Freud himself understood in somatic instinctual categories and in which he located repressed ideas; conflicts of forbidden desires; and evolutionary, ancient, or phylogenetic inheritances (the evolutionary aspects of psychoanalysis have been underplayed in my mind), later psychoanalytic thinkers, particularly American ones, understood as a potential door, to use a Jamesian metaphor, into other metaphysical realities and dimensions, including religious ones. Here is what Hewitt calls the "basic fault line" that opened up in the psychoanalytic tradition between Freud himself, who read all uncanny forms—say, spirit possession around the world—as expressions of the phylogenetic or evolutionary unconscious, and his later more religion-friendly readers and theorists, who have certainly been open to this original Freudian reading but have also been remarkably willing to entertain other ontological possibilities.[21]

Of particular importance to Hewitt's thought and theorizing is the way psychoanalytic thought is so affectively and intellectually grounded in the actual lives of her patients. This is a theory of the human being crystallized in the furnace of human suffering, emotion, desire, confusion, and pain. This is not just about texts. It is also about *people*, about what Hewitt calls our shared humanity, about what she herself italicizes as *the human*. Without this shared humanity, psychotherapy makes no sense, is not possible, cannot happen. Nor can the study of religion or, frankly, the humanities.

Hewitt's own humanity shines through everything she writes. She does not seek to "psychoanalyze" religious figures, to render them neurotic so that she can confidently reduce their experiences to something pathological. Rather, she seeks to "think psychoanalytically" about their experiences "in the service of knowledge and understanding."[22] And healing.

This knowledge, understanding, and healing, moreover, are comparative in nature; they are rooted in a human nature that we all share, that we

all are. If I might put it in a meme Hewitt does not use but I want to name and invoke now: *comparativism is compassion*.

By this phrase, I point out that the comparativist takes *every* religious experience and expression—no matter how troubling, disjunctive, or exotic, even the Devil himself—as an important expression and sign of the human psyche. But precisely because she must take *every* such experience seriously, she *cannot* take any such experience absolutely or literally, as the believer or patient might. That, after all, would make it impossible to take everyone else's experience seriously and humanely.

Accordingly, the comparativist must translate each and every human experience into another shared language or code. But such a new language, which is also a new form of communication—here a psychoanalytic one—need not be some arrogant assertion of certainty. It can also become an act of compassion and an expression of a shared humanity that seeks understanding *of everyone*, not just someone, always in a tentative, open-ended vision.

It is not possible to overestimate this comparativism and this compassion, or this sense of humility before the mystery of human beings, who can *never* be fully explained. I have seen all of these sensibilities work in real time with Hewitt as she talks about her patients and expresses her own profound sense of humility, even awe, before their psychic cries and strange knowing dreams.

Much like Powell's early patient at Harvard Medical School who told the young intern what would happen to her in the ensuing years, some of Hewitt's patients have manifested impossible empirical-imaginal abilities. Like the woman in the mental hospital suffering from intense paranoid fears about her children being attacked by birds: as a panel of clinicians, Hewitt among them, interviewed the patient on a floor high above the city, a gigantic bird form (probably a condor) hauntingly swooped by the immense windows behind the woman, *twice*, to the utter astonishment of the medical panel ("Did you see *that*?"). Or the patient who dreamed the precise details of Hewitt's personal weekend, down to the banisters, the chandeliers, the people, and the vanishing pool of the hotel—Schopenhauer's *Wahrträumen*, or "dreaming the truth," again.[23]

It is precisely in such moments, with these suffering-seeing human beings, that the healer-scholar came to see "the kernel of existential truth that inevitably lies at the core of the most seemingly 'crazy' stories that people tell."[24] In short, the kernel of existential truth in religion.

I understand that some of this might remain opaque to the reader, particularly one not familiar with psychoanalytic methods of emotional rap-

port and dream interpretation. At the very beginning of Hewitt's book, she describes her orientation in blunt and clear terms:

> When a distressed, perfectly sane patient told me that while fully awake he was visited by a spectral mother who wordlessly communicated to him that life would get better, that he would be alright, who imparted to him a blissful sense of peace he had never before known, I believed him. Not, "I believe that he believes he saw the woman." No. Do I believe that if I had been present, I too would have seen the spectral visitation, or that if a recording device had been operating in the room, it would have captured her image? No, I do not. Did he see her? I believe he did. Do I believe that there was a spirit presence in the room, with its own independent ontological reality, that took the form of a woman dressed in white? I do not. However, I do know that *something* happened, because from the moment he told me about his vision, his therapy turned a corner.[25]

I know of few, if any, authors who have articulated the paradoxical positioning or "third way" of the comparative study of religion more clearly than Marsha Hewitt has in lines like these.

Hewitt goes on to explore the earlier psychological works of William James, Frederic Myers, and Freud. Like the psychoanalytic writers discussed above, Hewitt turns to telepathy as the place or "portal" in the psychoanalytic tradition where the unconscious might well open out into new dimensions and possibilities, even perhaps religious ones. But Hewitt is critical of her psychoanalytic predecessors who have wanted to turn so quickly to the sciences (like Elizabeth Mayer's turn to quantum physics), which they seldom really understand, in order to construct new forms of a scientific spirituality, a new "mystical psychoanalysis" or "parapsychoanalysis," as she names their many projects. Hewitt instead calls these colleagues to turn to the humanities and, more specifically, to the study of religion, which is where she believes the topics of telepathy, the anomalous, and the new spiritualities and their imaginal engagement with the sciences really belong.[26]

Of course, I think she is right. In the process, she in fact extensively engages my own writing on the Human as Two through the category of the unconscious and my related theorization of paranormal phenomena. She describes them as "revelatory irruptions of super realities . . . instances of our natural capacities and potentialities that remain undeveloped at this stage of human evolution." My own thought is that they are instances of *an unconscious of the future*.[27] She also gets just right my insistence that

the revelations of such emerging capacities are especially likely in hypnoid states creatively related to trauma. She thus quotes R. D. Laing on how "the cracked mind of the schizophrenic may *let in* light which does not enter the intact minds of many sane people whose minds are closed" in order to speculate that, "I think Kripal would agree with Laing's sentiment."[28]

He would (I asked him).

Hewitt just gets it, no doubt because of all those actual suffering-seeing patients, real-world waking visions, and telepathic unconscious communications, but also—she is too humble to say this—because of her own remarkable ability to walk the tightrope of the human and not fall off either strange side. Carefully withholding from both the rational "explanations" of the scientists and the religious "beliefs" of the believer, Marsha Hewitt remains balanced on that tightrope, walking it ever so gingerly, humbly, and, above all, compassionately.

CRITICAL RACE STUDIES AS TWO: THE DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS OF W.E.B. DUBOIS AND SOME BLACK SUPERHUMANISMS

One of William James's most gifted undergraduate students at Harvard was a young African American intellectual by the name of W.E.B. DuBois (1868–1963). DuBois would have a remarkable life, which included studying in Germany with some of the leading social scientists of the time, earning a PhD at Harvard in sociology (the first PhD to be awarded to an African American at Harvard), and becoming the author of a book that is read and taught to this day in the humanities, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Indeed, DuBois is justly famous for being one of the undisputed founding figures of what today we call critical race studies and was the first to locate historically and theorize the category of whiteness.[29]

True to the superhumanities, in the opening lines of his most famous book, DuBois distinguished his own voice as both that of the scientific sociologist and, in a more poetic vein, that of the traditional seer:

> After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and

> pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[30]

The historical origins of the key DuBoisian expression "double consciousness" lay in, as discussed earlier, the history of European esotericism, and more specifically Mesmerism, magnetic sleep, and Spiritualism. But the other phrases here are similarly sourced and overdetermined: "seventh son," "born with a veil," "second sight," "twoness." They are all classically Spiritualist or occult tropes, which would have been immediately recognized as such in DuBois's own day.[31] "Born with a veil," for example, refers to the folklore around infants being born with the amniotic sac wrapped around their head (or entire body), thereby signaling, as the folklore claims, the future manifestation of various occult powers. Spirit seers.

It is hardly an accident, then, that DuBois named his most famous book after *souls*, not social identities or historical constructions (nor that, at this point in time, white peoples had debated for centuries whether Black peoples *had* souls).[32] It is also significant that DuBois would also imagine a democratic or cosmopolitan utopia beyond race as a "fourth dimension," another clear and obvious Spiritualist and later paranormal trope. We know that DuBois learned of the fourth dimension from James—in 1888–89, to be exact.[33] He was reading with James books such as Charles Howard Hinton's *Scientific Romances* (1886), which included an essay titled "What Is the Fourth Dimension?" Hinton's book was an early precursor of American science fiction and was a contemporary of Edwin A. Abbott's *Flatland* (1884).

We can probably not overestimate the influence of *Flatland*. This Victorian Spiritual classic used the new geometry of multiple dimensions to advance a radical but still coded social criticism (of the Victorian class system) and explore a new language of spiritual transcendence. Its humorous tale about a two-dimensional world from which a figure named "A. Square" is abducted by a sphere into the third dimension (very UFO-like) employed cutting-edge geometry to reconceive the soul and transcendence as perfectly natural hyperdimensional realities that influenced Einstein's later reimagination of the space-time continuum and much science fiction.

The little book was so effective because it was simple. It artfully and gracefully used something its readers *could* imagine (the relationship between a two-dimensional world and their own three-dimensional space) to teach them about what they *could not* imagine (the relationship between our three-dimensional world and the presumed fourth dimension of the

Spiritualists, the occult, and Christian transcendence). Transcendence was thus reconceived as part of *this* world. In effect, "up" or "heaven" became "in another dimension." The supernatural became the super natural. New realities were thus born.

As with Spiritualism and the abolition and suffragist movements, social criticism and occult transcendence were intimately linked and understood to be two sides of the same coin—or better here, the same floating sphere. The fourth dimension, in short, was not just about spiritual transcendence in a newly imagined super natural world; it was also about social criticism, about not being caught in the terms and identities of a "flat" class system.[34]

James also passed on to DuBois his central notion of the "sick soul," as opposed to the "healthy-minded" (more souls, please note). The sick soul, as James put it in *The Varieties*, does not fit into the social system of the place and time and so requires some kind of major mystical or conversion experience to realize his or her second birth. Such a "sick" and then "reborn" soul was in fact James's preferred person. James himself was certainly such a sick soul, and his famous *The Varieties* orbits around the same.

What DuBois appears to be offering in his own *Souls* is a Black revisioning of the Jamesian sick soul. He is arguing that Black people see more deeply into society *precisely because they do not fit into that social order*. They are, in fact, tortured, hated, and murdered by that so-called social order. The result is a kind of existential absurdity that renders it impossible to identify with the surrounding culture and renders the Black man or woman split in two, effectively living in two worlds at once—the absurdly unjust social world that will not grant integrity and full humanity to the person, and the spiritual world of the "negro," where he or she can find complex forms of subjectivity, meaning, value, integrity, and a rich inner life, often within ecstatic religious rituals and spiritual beliefs.[35] The Human is Two here in both a spiritual and moral register, but in *a doubleness that is now radicalized by being racialized*.

This fundamental idea, as Jamesian as it is DuBoisian, takes us back to my earlier point about why the humanities so often privilege marginalized voices and foreign persons: not only because this is the just thing to do but because *such marginalized positions can sometimes see more, can know more, can step back from the social order and question it "from the outside."* Like the Jamesian model of the mystical arising from suffering among the twice-born, wisdom spikes in the gaps and fissures of society, in existential crisis and despair, not in comfort, privilege, and certainty.

When DuBois invoked classic Spiritualist, psychical, and mystical tropes, then, we should read and understand them within these larger

historical, personal, and professional contexts. We should read them in conversation with William James, the psychical research tradition, Charles Hinton, and Edwin A. Abbott. Which is all to say, we can read DuBois in a superhumanist context.

It is certainly relevant here that DuBois was deeply committed to all forms of education, from the most basic to the most elite. After his Harvard undergraduate education, European training, and subsequent Harvard PhD, he spent years teaching in the country schools of Tennessee. It is also relevant that he gave special attention to finding and training what he called the Talented Tenth—the young Black intellectuals who could lead us *all* forward. He was most interested in an education that could "evolve that higher individualism," one that protects and nurtures these souls' development and expression. He was interested in "the sovereign human soul that seeks to know itself and the world about it" (sounds like Nietzsche). From his study of history, philosophy, and literature, DuBois knew well that "such souls aforetime have inspired and guided worlds." Enter the sufferings and unique gifts of Black men: "the rich and bitter depths of their experience, the unknown treasures of their inner life, the strange rendings of nature they have seen."[36]

"Strange rendings of nature." The phrase could easily be missed. It just hovers there in the text, like a ghost, like an early observation of the Black fantastic that has been largely overlooked. The same phrase might serve as an early turn-of-the-century prediction of what would come much later among Black authors and artists of science fiction and the Afrofuturist movement. Here is an early rendering of a Black esotericism that was largely overlooked but is now gaining real traction in the academy among intellectuals who really see and really want to look at precisely these esoteric currents of Black religious experience, thought, and art.

Black histories, communities, and religions, after all, are positively *filled* with "strange rendings of nature" and, yes, superhumans of all sorts. Such religious systems are actually unimaginable without them. One thinks of the living ancestors and magical or sorcerous practices of the African traditions, for sure, but also of West African Vodun and Haitian Vodou, Afro-Brazilian Candomblé, French Brazilian Spiritism, African and then American conjure (magical practice designed to enact new realities), possession, mediumship, American Spiritualism, and, most recently, Afrofuturism and the world of the superhero comic book.

Perhaps this is why the pop-cultural genre of the comic book was one of the first to offer what Adilifu Nama calls "a futuristic and fantastic vision of Blackness that transcended and potentially shattered calcified notions

of Blackness as a racial category and source of culture meaning."[37] In short, the Black superhumanities.

Nama is especially eloquent about the Marvel Comics artist Jack Kirby, a Jewish World War II veteran, likely severely traumatized by his war experience, who was well known for his paranormal, UFO, and occult enthusiasms. According to Nama, Kirby imagined the Black Panther in the summer of 1966 in ways that broke with the "passé notions of black figures narrowly tied to the ghetto. The placement of the Black Panther in various mystical and science fiction environments exhibits a noticeable break from that pattern."[38]

This, of course, takes us straight back to the poster for my "Mutants and Mystics" class described in this book's introduction, where "African" and "paranormal" meant more or less the same thing in the pop-cultural figure of the Black Panther. As well indeed they might mean the same thing in the history of religions: "Paranormal phenomena," writes the Dutch anthropologist Wim van Binsbergen, "may be argued to constitute a domain where the truth claims of African wisdom are not just valid within the local African space of culturally created self evidence, but may deserve to be globally mediated as a statement of a transcultural truth, and hence superior to current collective representations in the West."[39] The message is clear enough: paranormal phenomena are universal human phenomena that may well have their deepest anthropological roots—their superhuman roots—in indigenous African gnosis.

We are back to V. Y. Mudimbe's dream of a "transhistoric thought" and an "absolute discourse" emerging from an African gnosis. We are also back to the Black Panther.

Ramzi Fawaz has given us another study of similar pop-cultural patterns, this time emphasizing the ways that the superhero comics starting in the late 1950s began to engage liberal inclusion, transnational cooperation, human difference, queer forms of sexuality and gender, and race relations in America, thus functioning as a kind of esoteric "queer world-making," astonishingly for children and adolescents who were just coming into their cultural imaginations, sexual desires, and moral values. Fawaz notes that, through cross-racial male bonding and tough and realistic portrayals of drug addiction and urban poverty, the comics of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s moved away from the American superhero as an impenetrable white male body protecting the conservative institutions of society and toward what he calls a "queer mutanity."

For Fawaz, then, Kirby's fascination with the alien motif, or the mutant motif of the X-Men; the literally flaming body of the Human Torch; and

the stretching, fluid body of Mr. Fantastic of the Fantastic Four all came to constitute a rich visual lexicon for new pleasures and new possibilities outside heterosexual coupling. In the process, such a lexicon called into question the very notion of the human and exploded it (or flamed it) out toward the transhuman and even the superhuman. As Fawaz captures his own thesis: "Where once superheroes were symbols of national strength and paragons of U.S. citizenship, now they were framed as cultural outsiders and biological freaks capable of upsetting the social order in much the same way that racial, gendered, and sexual minorities were seen to destabilize the ideal U.S. citizen."[40] The racial, gendered, and sexual Others were now our *Übermenschen*, our superhumans. And, of course, they were all more or less Two. Phrases such as "alter ego" and "secret identity" became the norm.

Significantly, *The New Mutants* (the comic series from which Fawaz took the title of his book and the source of my original course poster announcing the superhumanities at my own university) would become a movie, have great difficulty "coming out," and would be finally released in the heart of the pandemic, in fall 2020.[41] The film, directed by Josh Boone, emphasized mutation as something that the public, and particularly the government, perceives as a dangerous pathology (the whole movie takes place in a hospital-prison enclosed by an invisible force field) and a real demonology (the film ends with the literal and symbolic destruction of a Christian church by an immense Native American totemic bear).

The film also featured the superhero genre's first openly queer superhero, Dani Moonstar, who is the real source of the demon-bear's protection and fury (reflecting real life, this character is played by queer Native American actor Blu Hunt). The film ends with Dani finally recognizing that the demon-bear is only terrifying and destructive because she has not acknowledged it as her own. In fact, it is the very visionary or imaginal embodiment of mutant power, *her own*.

There is a real-world backstory here. Boone himself, raised in an Evangelical family whose culture sought to stigmatize pop cultures and magical abilities, is a sophisticated reader of all things paranormal, as is evident in the film. It also seems relevant here that Boone told me that when he agreed to make *The New Mutants*, another filmmaker handed him a book—my own *Mutants and Mystics*. The main argument of the book is that the paranormal phenomena of science fiction and superhero comics are based on the actual paranormal experiences of the authors and artists—in short, superpowers are *both* empirical *and* imaginal; they are perfectly (or imperfectly) real within the new epistemology and ontology I am proposing here.

In this same spirit, it would be a serious, if understandable, mistake to see queer and Black superhuman currents in popular and literary sources as simply fictional, as somehow outside the historical Black religious experience. Consider the phrase "black magic." These words have long signified magical acts that are harming, negative, even deadly. *Black* has signified *bad*. Long biblical and monotheistic battles against indigenous cultures and peoples, coded as both "magical" and "demonic," also lie behind the troubling phrase.

Yvonne P. Chireau recovers the expression black magic as carrying these healing and harming histories but also a very real spiritual *power*, refusing in the process to separate religion from magic, or Christianity from conjure. Indeed, Chireau's basic thesis is that the eclecticism of African American religion constantly wove magical spiritualities into established religious practice, magical mechanism into prayer and piety—contentiously, yes, as the folklore gives ample witness, but also really and truly, as the same folklore also reveals. As one of her title sources puts it, "Our religion and superstition was all mixed up!"[42]

Although Chireau follows the academic rule of making no realist claims in her nuanced history of the complex relations between magical spiritualities and Black religion, between charms, roots, and the Bible, her powerful book works on many levels. In fact, it opens with a historical frontispiece on a historical figure named "Chloe Russell, A Woman of Colour of the State of Massachusetts, commonly termed the Old Witch or Black Interpreter. Who certainly possesses extraordinary means of fore-telling remarkable events."

Can we seriously consider, *trust* in Ricoeur's hermeneutical term, that "certainly," announced before the book even begins—the historical reality of divination or precognition, of "Hoodoo doctors" and "voodooism"? Or do we prefer to wish it all away with the usual suspicion? If so, are we not participating in the very colonial and monotheistic histories of denial and violent condemnation that Chireau details with such grace and precision? If we read past or wish to ignore that "certainly," are we not erasing Chloe Russell one more time to be done with her, to erase her and her powers from history yet again?

The twentieth century certainly did not see a disappearance of such powers and concerns in African American communities. It saw them reborn in other forms, including evolutionary and esoteric ones. Consider the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s, a remarkable period in the life of Manhattan that witnessed vast social, artistic, theatrical, and literary production. The personality of the writer Jean Toomer (1894–1967)

looms large. As does his close spiritual relationship to the Greek-born mystical writer and teacher G. I. Gurdjieff (1866–1949). Jon Woodson has given us a powerful study of Toomer and his Harlem colleagues in a book that certainly follows the academic principle of neutrality (Woodson himself takes no position) but is all about a group of Black writers who did anything but.

Toomer, we learn from Woodson, worked at Gurdjieff's institute in France and, through novels like *Cane* (1923), sought, in Woodson's terms, "to express the superior consciousness of the coming race of supermen."[43] The expression was Nietzschean, for sure, but its intended meanings were much more indebted to the Greek mystic, whose central teaching was that ordinary people are essentially "asleep" because of a false identification with the social ego and the body, including the racialized body, that keeps them ignorant of their true spiritual nature.

Gurdjieff captured our true spiritual nature under the rubric of "objective" consciousness, that is, consciousness of the All or the Absolute as it actually is outside the dictates of the ego or "false personality" and its endless social and cultural illusions. Gurdjieff also applied the adjective *objective* to works of art and literature that express this pure consciousness of the All outside the ego, including and especially his *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, an immense science fiction satire that works through metaphor, space travel, and humor to convey Gurdjieff's doctrines. It was precisely this objective art that the Harlem group was expressing for Woodson. The notion is important for us, because the Gurdjieffian paradox of an "objective art" collapses the empirical (the objective) and the imaginal (art) in recognizably superhuman ways.

Gurdjieff and his followers took these ideas far. In their language, the common human being is little more than a puppet, a mechanism, an automaton that, in one of Gurdjieff's more memorable and outrageous images, is also the food of the moon, which feeds on our suffering, violence, war, and stupidity—an image the Harlem group, as we shall see, will transform.

The language is unique (and a bit creepy), but the idea is a recognizable one: the Human is Two. Woodson explains this simple idea with profound consequences:

> The central insight of the system was that man is not a unified being, but is instead a being in whom the "I" (ego, identity, self) is relative and nonpermanent. . . . According to Gurdjieff, all of the catastrophes that take place in life, at whatever scale, arise from the fact that, in his fragmented

> condition, man does not know himself for what he is and is not. Moreover, the problems of human life cannot be effectively attacked by the systems in place because without recognizing the impermanence of the human personality all of the theories, systems, and therapies that mistakenly assess man's capabilities are invalid.[44]

Put in terms of the present discussion, any and all critiques that restrict themselves to the socialized self are bound to fail. They cannot possibly succeed because they are privileging the reality of precisely that which is not real. They are thus part of the problem, not the solution.

The solution is the spiritual evolution of consciousness beyond and outside culture within a small group of elite and capable individuals who can fully dedicate themselves to what Gurdjieff called "the work." The work was *hard*. It involved various elaborate mathematical and metaphysical concepts (around musical scales and "vibrations"), meditation exercises, and practices like "experimentation," or role-playing, which was used to underline and make obvious the fact that the ego is always acting, that it *is* an act.

Woodson captures Toomer's project in his book title: *To Make a New Race*.[45] The evolutionary and esoteric dimensions are obvious, not only in Toomer but in a group of Black writers that Woodson calls the Harlem group: Wallace Thurman, Rudolph Fisher, Nella Larson, George Schuyler, and Zora Neale Hurston. Woodson reads the poems and novels of these writers as ciphers to decode a set of recurring narrative, figures, and messages. These include a series of elaborate wordplays and codes pointing, for example, to the central presences of Gurdjieff and his two major interpreters, the British socialist activist A. R. Orage (who edited an important journal titled *New Age* and whose 1907 book was titled *Consciousness, Animal, Human, and Superhuman*) and the Russian esoteric writer P. D. Ouspensky. The Gurdjieffian themes coded in the Black literature ranged widely but focused on the superman, the evolution and involution of races and individuals (a theme inspired by nineteenth-century Theosophy), "mental freedom" or "mental independence," the "false personality" or the "mask," and, in Toomer's corpus in particular, "a future incommensurate with the present order, apocalypse, superconsciousness and the coming of a new race of mankind."[46]

It is important to emphasize again that this evolutionary project was an elitist one. In Woodson's language, "Gurdjieff taught that the evolution of large masses of humanity was impossible and opposed to nature's purposes. Because humanity neither progresses nor evolves, it is not in the

evolving man's interest to behave as other men do."[47] Hence Ouspensky could write that Gurdjieff had said that, "two hundred conscious people, if they existed and if they found it necessary and legitimate, could change the whole of life on the earth."[48] This is where the mythical moon returns, now with a more positive resonance (or appetite). To Woodson, "The central doctrine that spurred the Harlem group was that man produced 'a substance needed by some entity . . . thus serving the evolution or involution of that entity.' . . . Either man produced a finer food than war or man would be useless to the cosmos, for man's failure to evolve was retarding the evolution of higher worlds. Gurdjieff believed that this 'finer food' could be produced by two hundred conscious men, the 'inner circle of humanity.'"[49] The logic was symbolic and esoteric: change would come about because of the initiated and the knowers, not because of the public who did not and *could* not know.

Hence what Woodson calls "the way of the sly man," that is, the spiritual path that "separates its practitioners from other men: He is awake and they are asleep, machines, robots." Unsurprisingly, as Black intellectuals and artists working in the early twentieth century, one of their first and most acute objects of critique, and rejection, was the concept of race itself: "As Gurdjieffians, they did not believe that they were Negroes or that Negroes existed, and they stated as much metaphorically in their writings."[50]

To speak in other terms, it was precisely the paradoxical Blackness of these writers—at once socially real and metaphysically unreal—that gave them insight, that gave them a critical perspective, that gave them a way out of DuBois's double consciousness and so provided them with powerful esoteric insight into how ordinary humans are mere mechanisms and not true agents of their own destiny. In a phrase, *Blackness became a powerful esotericism*.

And theirs was an activist esotericism, because "there was a real attempt by Toomer and his Harlem followers to change the course of history through their Gurdjieffian endeavors. . . . Strangely enough, the group believed that they were the determinants of whether the future would be doomsday or paradise."[51] These were Black superhumans, or better, these were superhumans who were super partly *because* they were Black.

Such Black superhuman currents, it should also be noted, are hardly restricted to North America. Consider, as another example, Mestre Irineu, born Raimundo Irineu Serra (1890–1971), the deified Black founder of the Santo Daime religion of Brazil. Mestre was almost seven feet tall, the illiterate son of former enslaved people, and a spiritual genius. He expe-

rienced his own deification by drinking the psychoactive brew called the Daime, generally known today as ayahuasca. He is worshipped in the religion in his astral name of Juramidam as the continuation of the Christ Consciousness that Jesus of Nazareth once embodied and knew.

Another Brazilian figure, Padrinho Sebastião (1920–90), was a gifted healer and medium who added further dimensions to the religion. He joined the religion after being healed himself from drinking the Daime with Mestre Irineu in a ceremony in 1964. Under his later direction, the religion drew from an Afro-Brazilian mediumistic tradition (with deep roots in West Africa), the Umbanda religion, and came more and more to work with "suffering spirits," that is, dead people who have not moved on, who needed healing, compassion, and resolution. Among the spirits who work for such healing and compassion are the *caboclos* (deceased Native Americans) and *preto velhos* (deceased African slaves).

The ancestors, the living presence of the dead.

Pretty much exactly as I had it in my third definition of the superhumanities in chapter 1, or as we saw in the Hermetic or Gnostic texts of the ancient Mediterranean world or in the modern New Age movement today, a potent transcendent logic of a single Source, Light, Power, *the Force* produces a robust eclecticism with respect to the surrounding cultural traditions. Brazilian Roman Catholicism (including the Virgin Mary; the rosary; *missas*, or "masses"; and the communion of the souls of the dead) are combined with various esoteric notions of spiritual evolution; Theosophical currents (including Ascended Masters, Christ consciousness, and the key metaphysical notion of the astral plane, a kind of imaginal outer space); the presence of "clicking," tall, spindly mantis insectoid aliens; science fiction themes (including the UFO); a spiritually militarized costuming and community; Tantric kundalini yoga; and endless *mirações*, or visionary and mystical experiences catalyzed by the Daime. The Daime itself is understood to be a genuine sacrament, a material substance that chemically joins with the physical body of the initiate to transmit the "real presence" of Christ.[52]

Here is G. William Barnard's takeaway from his long ethnographic and spiritual engagement with the Brazilian Santo Daime tradition: "The ongoing sense I have received from drinking Daime is that we're all divine beings who have forgotten our true heritage as Daughters and Sons of God and the divine Mother. . . . And so, each one of us in our own way and in our own timing, is increasingly able to remember more of our True Nature." Articulated in a distinctly Catholic Brazilian language indebted to

a Brazilian Black godman, but also—please note—in an academic study published by a major university press, Barnard's words and work are yet more expressions of the superhumanities.

We might also invoke here the sacred land of Mexico or Mesoamerica. Consider the pioneering efforts of Stephen C. Finley and his work on the Nation of Islam.[53] The latter American religion understands its founder, Master Fard Muhammad, as both a human and God or Allah—a superhuman in my own terms. It also features an important esoteric teaching about the "Mother Wheel," essentially an immense, protective UFO, half a mile in diameter, in the sky. This latter esoteric doctrine, particularly noteworthy in the preaching of Louis Farrakhan (it goes further back), is based partly on a classic encounter experience that Farrakhan had on a sacred mountain in central Mexico in 1989. Here is Farrakhan describing the revelation event: "In a tiny town in Mexico, called Tepotzlan, there is a mountain on the top of which is the ruins of a temple dedicated to Quetzalcoatl—the Christ-figure of Central and South America—a mountain which I have climbed several times. However, on the night of September 17, 1985, I was carried upon that mountain, in a vision, with a few friends of mine. As we reached the top of the mountain, a Wheel, or what you call an unidentified flying object, appeared at the side of the mountain and called to me to come up into the Wheel."[54] He did. Actually, he was carried up by a light beam. Inside he heard Honorable Elijah Muhammad's voice through a speaker and saw a "projection of what was being written in my mind," essentially a kind of holographic vision of a telepathic communication. The result? "I am telling America that wherever I am the Wheel is!"

In short, *a deified human UFO*.

It would be tempting to read this superhuman esotericism as tangential to the contemporary history of the Nation of Islam. And one would be wrong again. The Mother Wheel hovers at the center, not the periphery, of the tradition, and a literature on the Nation's ufology has begun to develop.[55] Moreover, the Nation has well-known relationships to both Scientology and Sedona, Arizona, a New Age mecca. Cultural, religious, and metaphysical mixing (again) lie at the core, not the periphery, of the Nation.

Nor is the Nation of Islam a single ufological or New Age case. It is often said (as if to protect ourselves?) that the UFO is a white concern, or somehow restricted to the United States. Such statements are patently false, based on nothing but an ignorance of the vast literature. Europe, Russia, Africa, Asia, Australia, and Latin America all have rich ufological traditions. Indeed, some of the most striking and evidential cases are from

Australia, Africa, and Latin America.[56] One of the first abduction cases was the mixed-race figure of Antonio Vilas-Boas, a Brazilian farmer become lawyer who, according to his own account, was taken on board a landed spaceship in 1957 and forced into sex with a growling star-woman. Such events sit well within a long global history of demonology and sexual encounters, many of them quite negative or terrifying with various supernatural entities. In any case, the UFO phenomenon is global or planetary, not Western or white.

With the merest click of the lens, other types of the super can easily be found in other Black religious traditions, including more traditional ones. It is certainly not all about human deification (although the motif is remarkably stable and insistent). Central historical activists like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., for example, make *no* sense without the transcendent universalisms of Islam and liberal Protestant Christianity, respectively. It was precisely what I call the super (which both men imagined and understood as God) that drove their dedication to human social justice around race, religion, and the civil rights movement. No God, no activism; or, in my terms, no super, no human. It is that simple.

Nor did such a double consciousness somehow end with the civil rights movement or the 1960s. The same doubled patterns carry on, unabashed, if we would simply look closely at our own present moment. Biko Mandela Gray, for example, works on and participates in the #blacklives matter movement and addresses anomalous moments in contemporary Black activism, like a mother knowing her son had just been killed many miles away in a racist murder. Significantly, Gray has also studied some of the traumatic mystical implications of being Black in America, the "Othered Others," as he poetically describes them, and the theological role such a doubled doubleness carries in contemporary Black religious movements that emphasize human deification, like the Five Percenters.[57]

Consider also in this same contemporary activist context the most remarkable figure of Ms. Donna Haskins, as studied and interpreted by Onaje X.O. Woodbine. Ms. Haskins is a contemporary Bostonian Black woman who combines Roman Catholic, Afro-Caribbean, African ancestors, and Baptist and Holiness traditions in order to enter and work within what she calls the spirit world.

What is so significant here is *why* Ms. Haskins enters such a spirit realm: to battle sexual predators and work with the spirits of murdered Black children, former slaves, American Indians, and the structural injustices suffered by Black women. To serve the good and battle these evils, she is gifted with various "supernatural powers," such as the abilities of astral

flight, telepathically speaking in tongues, teleportation to other places and times in order to aid people in the present, and the prophetic power of seeing into the past, present, and future of individuals whom she meets.

The veil between the two worlds, the natural and the supernatural, is thin and porous. Accordingly, her experiences sometimes take on a particular empirical register alongside the more obvious and dominant theological understandings of her own belief. Ms. Haskins, for examples, intuits—in Woodbine's words now—"the true nature of space and time" in her sleep, a knowing that involves observing "the past and the future as an object in the distance." In Woodbine's interpretation again, it was "as if her ethereal self was moving through the cosmos at light speed, turning time into a slow-moving object relative to her own perspective. From the vantage point of the speed of light, Donna could enter the past or future in surprising ways, and always to make the present more livable for other people." She had learned that there was not one, but two ways of perceiving temporality: "the one transcendent, and the other mundane, as spiritual time and as time of the flesh."[58] The Human is Two. The World is Two. Time is Two.

In the fantastic spirit (realm) of the present book, Ms. Haskins also does not hesitate to turn to science fiction or Afrofuturist language in order to understand and express what Woodbine describes as her regal presence or "interior wealth and sense of majesty." As Ms. Haskins describes herself: "In the spirit world, I look like Halle Berry in the movie *X-Men*."[59] The reference is to the African mutant and goddess-warrior called Storm, who can summon, channel, and focus the awesome powers of the weather, including and especially lightning bolts.

BLACK LIGHT AND NOTHINGNESS: RACE AND COMPARATIVE MYSTICAL LITERATURE

We can also turn to philosophy and the history of comparative mystical literature for ontological discussions of Blackness. Two motifs seem particularly relevant: black light and nothingness.

Consider, as a start, Henri Corbin's discussion of the Man of Light in Iranian Sufism and his interpretive treatment of "a state of 'dualitude,' a *unus-ambo* structure" of the human being. The human being is a "bi-unity," what Corbin captured with yet another *super-* word (which he liked to italicize) as "consciousness and *superconsciousness*."[60] Hence also his long and famous discussions of the "imaginal" realm of Iranian Sufism, that third

space or middle reality "where what is bodily becomes spirit and what is spiritual acquires a body."[61] Another form of transphysicality.

It is within this duality that Corbin discusses the "black light" of superconsciousness, which he in turn relates to the "super-individuality of the mystic," that is, to "the transcendent dimension of the person." Such a transcendent level of reality is described as "black" because it possesses no other, no object. It is a "black Light in which the ipseity of the *Deus absconditus* [hidden God] is pre-sensed by the superconsciousness."[62]

It will likely come as no surprise that Corbin was yet another superhumanist writer who thought and wrote out of his own altered states and mystical experiences. He called the great twelfth-century Sufi martyr Suhrawardi, whom we met in chapter 3, "mon shaykh" (my master). Corbin even spoke explicitly of being initiated by the martyred mystic over the reach of some seven centuries. Please note that it was the medieval Persian Sufi who initiated the modern French scholar of Sufism, not the other way around.

To my knowledge, Corbin's black light of superconsciousness has not been picked up by critical race theorists or Black studies. Another common mystical theme has, however—that of nothingness. Consider Fred Moten's difficult but profound 2013 essay, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)."[63] I cannot say that I understand everything that Moten articulates, because I was not trained in the Continental philosophy that he employs so effortlessly (Heidegger, Husserl, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze), but it is obvious that the essay represents a transformation of Black critical theory into Black mystical thought—here of a distinctly apophatic or Buddhist nature—that is significant for our present purposes.

For Moten, one of the most productive expressions of Black critical race theory in recent years has been the lyrical Afro-pessimism of Frank B. Wilderson III.[64] Afro-pessimism emphasizes analytic precision and poetic anguish in uncovering an omnipresent anti-Black racism that holds white society together and privileges the moral refusal of any romantic optimism about the fate and future of Black lives within such a violent symbolic order—"the structure of the entire world's semantic field," as the poet Nathanael Mackey puts it.[65] In Afro-pessimism is a form of critique that does not flinch, that does not blink before the historical facts of chattel slavery, endless systemic racism, and economic suppression.

Moten calls these Afro-pessimist colleagues at the beginning and end of the essay "just friends"; he wants to honor their integrity and conclu-

sions and the beauty and power of their writing. But he also wants to argue that such analytic rigor is itself a function of fancy and, if I understand him correctly, that the "nothingness" to which Black life is reduced in white society can function as a kind of ascetic or apophatic practice. In Nietzschean terms, he wants to *revalue* the terms and structures of Black life, move beyond the No to an ecstatic Yes.

Accordingly, Moten wants to argue that Afro-pessimism is limited by its own metaphysical assumptions, which boil down to the idea of "the imaginary perspective of the political subject," the idea that Black lives can be fully understood as political actors in space and time.[66] From this perspective and the lessons of history, Moten argues, Black lives can only lose, and social death will be the inevitable result. Hence Afro-pessimism makes perfectly good sense *within its own ideological and metaphysical assumptions*.

In my own running metaphor, such thought is restricted to the two-dimensional space of the chessboard, to what Moten calls "this framework" in which "blackness and antiblackness remain in brutally antisocial structural support of one another."[67] The chess game, after all, pits white pieces against black pieces, and the rules *assure* winners and losers, if, yes, also an occasional draw.

But what if Black lives are *more*, are not simply political subjects on a black and white chessboard? And what if "nothing" is itself generative, as, for example, in Zen Buddhism and the "absolute nothingness" of the Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitarō, whom Moten admiringly invokes and employs? This, I take it, is where Moten wants to go.[68] He wants to stand up from the chessboard, or better, see what is underneath it: "our undercommon, underground, submarine sociality."[69] He wants to talk about thinking from no standpoint, from an "existence without standing," as in the dark, dank holds of slave ships and "the sea, which is nowhere," and the altered "extrasensorial" states such holds would have certainly induced in those who could survive them.[70] He wants to write about how "blackness is the place that has no place."[71] Hence Moten's appreciative quoting of the famous Chinese Buddhist scripture *Prajnaparamita Sutra*: "Having No Place wherein it abides, this Mind arises."[72]

There is something recognizably, even obviously, mystical about Moten's language, which, of course, is the very point of his title. It is also a point to which he returns at the very end of the essay, in the form of a question about whether it is Afro-pessimism or Black optimism (his own) that is mystical.[73] I think Moten's implied but not quite stated answer is "both." Afro-pessimism becomes here a preparation for Black optimism: the No lays the ground for the Yes, much, again, as we saw in Nietzsche.

Like so many mystical writers before him, Moten is always "saying away" (*apo-phasis*) what he is writing about, as when he writes that Blackness is "ontology's underground, the irreparable disturbance of ontology's time and space." Or, "blackness bears or is the potential to end the world."[74] He even writes of "unowning," one of the adjectives that Dionysius, whom we met in chapter 3, used to describe the divine in his own newly coined super-knowledge or "mystical theology." By invoking the word "unowning," Moten seems to mean what he writes about later in the essay: "to live among the ones who cannot own, the ones who have nothing and who, in having nothing, have everything."[75] He will even write of "this nothingness, this radical poverty-in-spirit."[76] In such moments, Moten sounds like Meister Eckhart on poverty, or Saint John of the Cross on *nada*, or "nothing." I recognize, of course, that such a nothingness or radical poverty of the spirit is differently inflected around race. And yet there are recognizable echoes or comparative resonances here. Why is this?

On one level, the essay is a long reflection on Édouard Glissant's "consent not to be a single being."[77] For "[in] the hold [of the slave ship], blackness and imagination, in and as consent not be a single being, are (more and less than) one."[78] Toward the same seeming paradoxical end, he invokes (without naming) DuBois's fourth dimension and Henry Corbin's imaginal realm, writing of "the monastic preparation of a more than three-dimensional transcript, an imaginal manuscript we touch upon the walls and one another, so we can enter into the hold we're in, where there is no way we were or are."[79]

What Moten seems to want to deconstruct here is "the emergence of man," human identity itself, "that concrete place of the contradictory identity of objectivity and subjectivity" of which both Zen Buddhism and Black critical theory speak.[80] He is after "a nothingness without reserve, independent of the desire to show up in and for the conventional optics wherein somebody is delineated and identified."[81]

Perhaps most complex of all is Moten's referencing of the multivalent *mu* that structures the first half of the essay: as the Greek root for "myth" (and "mysticism," I would add); as the later name for an Atlantis-like continent in modern esoteric thought; as a Japanese translation of the Chinese *wu*, for nothing, not, emptiness, and nothingness; and as the answer to the Zen riddle or *koan*, "Does a dog have Buddha nature or not?" (The master answered, "Mu!"). Particularly important for Moten is the 1982 musical performance "Mutron" by drummer Ed Blackwell and jazz trumpeter Don Cherry. Here is Moten on the musical piece, alluding, I assume, to every other meaning of *mu* in his own jazz-like essay: "*Mu* is

the practice of mysticism in the flesh; 'Mutron,' the ritual Blackwell and Cherry perform, is their concentration meditation. It indexes the specific and material history of the drowned and burned, the shipped and held, as the condition for the release not just of the prevailing worldview but of the very idea of worldview, of transcendental standpoint and Pure Land. Cherry and Blackwell are initiates, who in turn initiate us, in what is to abide in the social materiality of no place, of Having No Place, as a place for study."[82] In such moments, Blackness has become a cipher for mystical nothingness. Black theory and thought have moved in some distinctly Buddhist directions. Black critical theory has ceased to be simply human and has become superhuman.

LA FACULTAD OF GLORIA ANZALDÚA: QUEER POSTCOLONIAL THEORY IN THE NEW AGE

Psychoanalytic and critical race theories are not alone in manifesting robust forms of human doubleness. Similar patterns can be seen in postcolonial theory, feminist theory, queer theory, and, sometimes, as we will see in a moment, all three in the same person.

Consider postcolonial theory for a moment. Deepak Sarma has written an eloquent essay on the topic in the study of religion, detailing the plausibility, the power, and the philosophical problems of the method as he focuses on the central case of South Asia.[83] At the end of the essay, Sarma sees the very Western, very European method (Marxist and materialist in orientation) as a kind of boat or raft composed of different historical materials, which we can put together and use to cross the river. But postcolonial theory for Sarma is finally a functional and rather arbitrary construction, not a destination. Sarma rhetorically points to the other side of the river (again, a very Indian image with strong connotations of ultimate transcendence "on the other shore"), to which he does not arrive in this particular essay but gestures toward.

And Sarma knows of what he gestures. He knows perfectly well what is on the other side of the river for the different streams of Indian philosophy. Sarma, after all, is our most accomplished interpreter of Dvaita Vedanta, the Hindu dualist tradition.[84] He has in fact spent much of his professional career exploring how this rich stream of Indian philosophy does not conflate the soul (*atman*) and the body and its embodied social self, including, of course, the social selves of postcolonial theory on *this* side of the river. Within the ontology of Dvaita Vedanta, such a social self or personality, including the mind (*manas*), are of a physical nature and

so are of the body (*sharira*). When the body dies, all this dies, too, but the *atman* lives on and reincarnates in other bodies and so other socialized persons. Put in the context of the current discussion, *the human is not just the embodied self of society and some singular history*. Put more simply still, *the human is super.* Or, if you prefer, the core of the human is not human at all.

I want to take up Sarma's concluding gesture with respect to postcolonial theory about *both sides* of the river in order to look more closely at a single theorist. If there were ever a postcolonial thinker who similarly acknowledges both sides of the river, and then crosses over, it is the American Chicana lesbian theorist Gloria Anzaldúa (1942–2004).[85]

Anzaldúa was born twenty-five miles from the Mexico border in south Texas in that long stretch of the Rio Grande (a literal river crossing) that is known to its inhabitants as El Valle. Anzaldúa was educated at Texas Woman's University and Pan American University, then at the University of Texas, Austin, where she completed her master's degree and coursework for a PhD. in comparative literature. She would resign from the University of Texas and complete, again, the coursework and dissertation draft in another field (American literature) at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she had moved in 1977. The countercultural history and New Age milieu of Santa Cruz had a profound and obvious (if mostly unacknowledged) impact on her visionary experiences, thinking, and writing.[86] She died in Santa Cruz in 2004 of long-standing diabetes complications.[87]

Anzaldúa is particularly interesting for our present purposes, because her work engages all the critical perspectives that I am rereading here—including those involving sexuality, race, postcolonialism, and environmentalism—but also moves beyond them all into some explicitly ontological territory. She thus performs both sides of the river, of the Human as Two, and so of the superhumanities, in a truly iconic fashion, and in a way that refuses to separate these two dimensions, conflate them, *or* resolve them.

She can write, for example, about finding "my own intrinsic nature buried under the personality that had been imposed on me" in her southern Texas culture, but also of not leaving her family history behind but keeping "the ground of my own being." Always, though, there is a "rebel in me," which she calls the "Shadow-Beast." "It is a part of me that refuses to take orders from outside authorities."[88]

In this same double consciousness, Anzaldúa has been very influential on political activists. Her central contribution, *Borderlands* (1987), for

example, was banned by the Tucson Unified School System in Arizona in January 2012 in an attempt to eliminate Mexican American studies from the curriculum. It is not difficult to see why. Élia Cantu and Aída Hurtado observe that Anzaldúa's radical insistence on the creative mixing of different cultural elements (from Tex-Mex food and Spanglish to the neo-shamanisms of the New Age) in order to form new cultural and psychological wholes was "blasphemous" in the late 1980s, when *Borderlands* was first published.[89] I would only point out that such a transcendent mixing and matching of local cultural elements is *still* blasphemous in many circles, including in most academic ones.

Several Anzaldúan themes particularly interest and attract me, including the paradoxical manner in which she links or joins the superhuman and the sexual; the evolutionary occult capacity of what she called *la facultad*; and a subsequent understanding, through this same occult faculty, of comparison as a kind of traumatic and revelatory mixing based on a metaphysics of connection, not contradiction, that in turn evolves new forms of consciousness and culture. Allow me to treat each of these themes in turn.

First, there is Anzaldúa's explicit invocation of the superhuman and how she relates it to the sexual, "these two forces" in us, as she calls them: "Humans fear the supernatural, both the undivine (the animal impulses such as sexuality, the unconscious, the unknown, the alien) and the divine (the superhuman, the god in us). Culture and religion seek to protect us from these two forces."[90] Both the superhuman and the sexual thus together make up her doubled notion of the supernatural. There is no sense that one must pick, that one can affirm either the one (sexuality) or the other (superhumanity). They come *together* for her.

Related to this is Anzaldúa's clear sense of a kind of cosmic sexuality or mystical eroticism expressed in the physical experience of getting "wet" and being "fucked" (her words) by a transcultural hermaphroditic goddess with a penis and the rhythmic unison of "the cosmos, my heart and my cunt."[91] Anzaldúa *clearly* wants to affirm what I have elsewhere called a super sexuality and not stop at the usual humanist conclusions.[92] "I know things older than Freud, older than gender," she would write in another context.[93] Like so many other queer peoples, she sees her embodied denial of sexual and gender binaries not as a psychiatric symptom or a mark of confusion but as a sign that human nature is not so limited and can "evolve into something better."[94]

Opposed to all this is what she calls "white rationality," which effectively atrophies the inner psychic senses and tells people like her that the

"other world" is "mere pagan superstition," that she cannot do what she in fact does, like sense the presence of ancestors in her room *as she writes her book*.[95] As AnaLouise Keating has described such moments, writing for Anzaldúa could become a kind of conjuring, or shamanic mediumship, or, in my own terms now, a kind of paranormal practice.

Writing and language were not about description or correspondence with some external reality (her own subject-object collapse renders any such pragmatic use of language secondary), but magical invocation and transformation of a shared and singular reality through the very acts of writing and reading, which have now become, in Keating's phrase, a "post-shamanic aesthetics."[96] In her own words, "I 'trance,'" that is, she projects "film-like narratives" on the screen of her mind, which in turn want to become textualized. Indeed, when she does not write them down, she gets physically ill.[97] The internal visionary movies want, *demand* to be written out. The impossible in effect authors itself.

The result of a whiteness opposed to all this, of an epistemology that emphasizes only the splitting of the world into a subject and a set of objects, is "the 'official' reality of the rational, reasoning mode, which is connected with external reality, the upper world, and is considered the most developed consciousness—the consciousness of duality."[98] Her language both confirms the spiritual duality of human experience (hence the "upper world" or "other world") even as it also denies the ultimacy of the dualities of cognition and moral judgment.

Very much related here is Anzaldúa's central notion of *la facultad*, the faculty. She means something quite precise but also quite capacious and mysterious by the Spanish expression: "*La facultad* is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an instant 'sensing,' a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning." *La facultad* seems to be a function or capacity of a dominant right brain and a nondominant social position. Such a sensing is mediated by the imagination, by images and symbols, and is most commonly found among those "who are pushed out of the tribe for being different," that is, "the females, the homosexuals of all races, the darkskinned, the outcast, the persecuted, the marginalized, the foreign."[99]

We are back to the paranormal-in-the-gaps, the traumatic secret, and the idea that marginalized peoples bear some unique or special relationship to the superhuman, some special access to "the inner life of the Self" or "the supra-human, the god in ourselves."[100] We are back to James's sick soul and DuBois's souls of Black folk and their special forms of double consciousness.

In truth, *la facultad* is an explicitly paranormal capacity or "sixth sense that's lain dormant from long-ago times" and that is cultivated by marginalized peoples in order to survive the male violences of history—violences that can also break a human being open within a spiritual trauma or what Anzaldúa calls a shamanic *susto*, a "soul loss."[101] As Anzaldúa understands it, such individuals are essentially forced into this occult faculty by the need to know who will next "slap or lock [them] away."[102] They can "sense the rapist when he's five blocks down the street"—that is, they become clairvoyant and precognitive *because they have to*. This type of "radar" is latent in everyone but is most developed in those who are persecuted.

In a similar spirit, Anzaldúa describes how she can feel the "lingering charge" of a recent emotional event in a room—a fight, love-making, a depression. She also describes how she feels a tingling on her skin when someone is staring at her or thinking of her. She can see or sense in the dark without looking.[103] She sees "plumes" or auras around her fingers when she writes, in red ink no less.[104]

La facultad can also result in out-of-body experiences or spiritual flights that grant empirical knowledge of space and time, of geography, of the physical landscape: "I have this visionary experience where I'm flying in the sky as an eagle. . . . I gather information from looking down at the ground. Now, how did I get that information if my body is just here?"[105]

There is no other way to put the matter: Gloria Anzaldúa was *psychic*.

Anzaldúa was two or three when she first realized that she was different, that she carried the "mark of the Beast." She could see it in her parents' worried looks. "The secret that I tried to conceal was that I was not normal, that I was not like the others. I felt alien. I knew I was alien. I was the mutant stoned out of the herd, something deformed with evil inside."[106] She looks into a mirror and sees a stranger's face with two very different kinds of eyes (and so two very different kinds of brain hemispheres, I would add): "the tongueless magical eye and the loquacious rational eye." She is eloquent about how such a Human as Two cannot be integrated, cannot even speak to the other: "Separated, they could not visit each other and each was too far away to hear what the other was saying."[107]

One of the most striking aspects of Anzaldúa's thought is its clear *evolutionary* aspect, an aspect that was likely inspired by the California counterculture and human potential movement that erupted and developed all around and in Santa Cruz, where Anzaldúa lived from 1977 on. Her self-

identification as a "mutant" just above signals as much (the mutant was a common trope in the hippie counterculture). But there were many other such passages. Here is how she put her evolutionary esotericism in the first edition of *Borderlands* in 1987: "Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an 'alien' element. There is an exhilaration in being a participant in the further evolution of humankind, in being 'worked' on. I have the sense that certain 'faculties'—not just in me but in every border resident, colored or non-colored—and dormant areas of consciousness are being activated, awakened. Strange, huh?"[108] Not strange at all. These are the superhumanities, unnamed and so relatively unknown but, I hope, obvious now.

It is also fairly easy to detect a certain extraterrestrial esotericism in Anzaldúa's writing. Hence the theorist's emphasis in the above passage on "alien," "worked" on, and "certain faculties." These words and phrases sound very much, indeed *exactly*, like textual echoes of an earlier abduction or near-death experience, or a whole series of them. Anzaldúa's elaborate descriptions of "four bouts with death" and various possession states with Aztec entities, Mexican Indian goddesses, and totemic animal souls only strengthen such a guess.[109]

It is probably no accident that the word *alien* is simply everywhere in *Borderlands*. It actually might be *the* word of the whole book. And it's loaded. Yes, it means immigrant, Mexican, or border resident, but it also refers to an uncanny presence, even an extraterrestrial presence. At one point, for example, Anzaldúa looks in a mirror and sees "all eyes and nose," a not uncommon experience (minus the nose) in the abduction literature.[110] She even claims that the "*mestizo* and the queer exist at this time and point on the evolutionary continuum for a purpose." That purpose? To "link people with each other—the Blacks with Jews with Indians with Asians with whites with extraterrestrials."[111]

Yes, extraterrestrials.

Anzaldúa even entertains the thought that mutants like her will decide to give up on the dominant culture and "cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory."[112] This sounds like Nietzsche, and this *is* the mythos of contemporary films like *Logan* (2017), where the "new mutants" literally cross the Canadian border to escape the militarized violences of the United States and pursue another genetic-cultural line. It is as if Gloria Anzaldúa saw the future movie, or, if you prefer, the X-Men screenwriters were reading Gloria Anzaldúa.

Then there is José Vasconcelos, the Mexican philosopher who wrote of *una raza mestiza* and *la raza cósmica*, the new fifth, mixed and cosmic race that would emerge from the four major races of the world (this sounds vaguely Theosophical). Anzaldúa comments that Vasconcelos's vision is not a racist agenda but an inclusive one, with this mixing of the races producing a richer, more malleable gene pool and eventually "an 'alien' consciousness."[113] This will be a new mestiza consciousness that is defined by a "tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity."[114]

Here is where her central theoretical contribution of a new mestiza consciousness comes in, and where the theorist offers a solution to our present identity politics that is anything but yet another doubling down on cultural or ethnic identity. Her solution, it turns out, is not this or that, but a most profound *in between*:

> *En unas pocas centurías* [In a few centuries], the future will belong to the *mestiza*. Because the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures. By creating a new mythos—that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave—*la mestiza* creates a new consciousness. The work of *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality. . . . The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundations of our lives, our cultures, our languages, our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war.[115]

In short: get off the chessboard.

One of the most dramatic and clearest instances of such a transformation on the individual level occurs as a rather obvious example of what was known at that time and in that same part of California as a kundalini awakening, so named for the Tantric Sanskrit category of the sleeping energetic serpent coiled up (*kundalini* means "she who is coiled") at the base of the spine, in the anal and sexual regions. When awakened through yogic discipline, for example, through bodily locks (particularly of the sphincter muscle but also above the palate), or accidentally, this serpentine force shoots up the spinal core of the body into the head, sometimes resulting in a transcendent form of consciousness experienced above the head, raining or shining down to transform, utterly, the person into something else, something nonhuman or superhuman. Pretty much exactly like this:

> Suddenly, I feel like I have another set of teeth in my mouth. A tremor goes through my body from my buttocks to the roof of my mouth. On my palate I feel a tingling ticklish sensation, then something seems to be falling on me over me, a curtain of rain or light. . . . The sphincter muscle tugs itself up, up, and the heart in my cunt starts to beat. A light is all around me—so intense it could be white or black or at that juncture where extremes turn into their opposites. . . . Something pulsates in my body, a luminous thin thing that grows thicker every day. Its presence never leaves me. I am never alone. That which abides: my vigilance, my thousand sleepless serpent eyes blinking in the night, forever open. And I am not afraid.[116]

Something in her now takes over Anzaldúa's mind, soul, and sexuality, something that will have "dominion over serpents" and belongs to her alone. "Not the heterosexual white man's or the colored man's or the state's or the culture's or the religion's or the parents'—just ours, mine."[117] She was *so* aware of the Human as Two. Indeed, she had always been aware "that there is a greater power than the conscious I," an "entity that is the sum total of all my reincarnations, the godwoman in me I call *Antígua mí Diosa*, the divine within."[118] (Indian Tantra, by the way, focuses on just such an inner goddess.)

It is difficult for me to express how close this is to the vision of a writer who would have been Anzaldúa's contemporary: the Kashmiri civil servant and spiritual writer Gopi Krishna, whose *Kundalini: The Evolutionary Energy in Man* (1967) I strongly suspect Anzaldúa read and was silently channeling here. If she had not read this book, she should have. It's her.[119]

Or sort of her. What Anzaldúa adds to Krishna's evolutionary vision of the serpent-like kundalini awakening is the motif of social and personal suffering as the mechanism of evolutionary collective advance. "In our very flesh, [r]evolution works out the clash of cultures. It makes us crazy constantly, but if the center holds, we've made some kind of evolutionary step forward. . . . We have become the quickening serpent movement."[120]

La facultad begins, then, as a survival instinct or evolutionary adaptation, but it can also be cultivated into a disciplined comparative imagination by reading and thinking in particular ways and especially by living in the borderlands of various cultures and bodies, borderlands that allow for no stable identity, be it national, cultural, religious, or sexual.

It is all about mixing.

The author, particularly in her work *Light in the Dark, Luz in lo Oscuro*, would later move away from the category of the borderlands to the liminal space of *nepantla*, the Nahuatl word for the space or place between

worlds—in the Nahuatl case, metaphysical ones.[121] Eventually, this liminal existence can result in the new mestiza consciousness, that is, the new mixed consciousness. The latter, as we have already seen, is a particular spiritual and plural orientation that allows one to see beyond all societies and religions to some shared superhuman nature and the magical interconnectedness of all things—the plural unity of reality itself.

ECOCRITICISM AS TWO: DARK ECOLOGY, NONHUMAN AGENTS, AND GOD

It is all about scale. How one compares our potential or actualized humanities and so how one enacts different realities will depend largely on how big one's story is, how far one can imagine, the scale on which we choose to think, imagine, and build. And so we come to my final example of how the superhuman is a central feature of marginalized communities and cultures: that most contemporary cutting edge of humanist thought that my colleague Timothy Morton calls "the ecological thought."[122]

Morton's phrase refers to the paradoxical thought that we are not separate from the natural world, that *there is no nature apart from humanity*, that it is all one immense beautiful, violent, living, self-consuming presence: "You don't have to *be* ecological. Because you *are* ecological."[123] Such an ecology emphasizes real difference, that is, the multiplicity or immensity of real objects—natural or manmade, it makes no difference—confronting one another in all their messiness, strangeness, even apparent ugliness. Such an endless Möbius-like nature of the real, of which we are an intimate part and expression, which knows itself in and as us, Morton calls a "dark ecology."

As Morgan Meis has it, Morton also intends to "flip the script," that is, "use a moment of crisis to transform our thinking. It's Morton's belief that, as we approach the ecological precipice, it is becoming easier to see our reality differently."[124] Including and especially our view of the human. Morton's view of the human, or "humankind," as they put it, is at once hyperdimensional, radically self-reflexive (the *ouroboros* is one of their favorite images), and eminently super, *not* because such a humankind is somehow set apart from the cosmos but precisely because it is not. Humankind *is* that cosmos become aware of itself.[125] This is a modern expression of the Romantic (or Hermetic) consciousness in an updated and trippy form. It is posthuman for its insistence on "solidarity with nonhuman people," but it is also, in my way of thinking, superhuman. The superhuman here,

after all, does not refer to some kind of glorified and arrogant Western ego. Quite the exact opposite. It conjures an always available field of cosmic consciousness that is everywhere, everyone, and everything; that is, exactly like the Ancient One of the Doctor Strange comic book page, in the water, the rock, and the tree.

Such a (non)human or (super)human is also doubled. Consider Christopher Nolan's film *Interstellar* (2014), which Morton enthusiastically engages toward the end of *Humankind*.[126] The film begins and ends with a scene in which the character of Murph, the daughter of retired NASA astronaut Joseph Cooper (now working as a corn farmer), experiences a paranormal event in the family's home library involving the inexplicable movement of a book, which literally jumps off the shelf (sound familiar?). The film ends with both Murph and Cooper realizing that Cooper himself was the one manipulating the books; that he was, in effect, in actual effect, Murph's poltergeist.

In the *classic* move of the modern paranormal (which rereads "supernatural" events as "super natural" ones), this haunting is explained in the film through the speculative principles of quantum physics and the black hole and, more specifically, the special effects of a tesseract, or five-dimensional cube that Cooper enters via a black hole near Saturn on a special space mission. Such a tesseract can display all moments of time simultaneously.

This is impossible, of course, for a three-dimensional imagination like ours to process or understand (remember *Flatland*?), so the tesseract takes on a symbolic form for Cooper (and us)—the library representing now the entire life span of his daughter, Murph. From within such a dreamlike tesseract of the black hole in outer space, Cooper can communicate with Murph via the manipulation of the books in the home library and use the dials of a watch in the same library to communicate a bit of crucial math that Murph will later, as an adult quantum physicist, use to crack the code of gravity, thereby allowing humanity to leave a warming, dying Earth just before it is too late.

Here is the key point I want to make. Speculative quantum physics and tesseracts aside, *Interstellar* is a film finally about *us haunting us*, from the future no less. The film does not question the reality of paranormal events. Quite the opposite, it naturalizes them, or super naturalizes them, and then—and this is more important still—reads them as key communications that need to be decoded and interpreted. The paranormal sign is not just scientifically productive here. *It is literally what saves*

humanity. It is super-science in code. That is not quite what I have been arguing throughout these pages. But it is very close. It is only a slight exaggeration.

Because we cannot ordinarily see any of this, because we cannot see through our cultural and religious productions as *our* cultural and religious productions, because we cannot see that we have long been haunting ourselves (is not this the bedrock insight of the humanities as a whole?), we suffer within the stories we tell ourselves. The sun grows hotter, and we become afraid.

The history of religions becomes one long, dark noir movie here, one long (legitimate but now dysfunctional) science fiction story. As Morton states, "Just like in noir fiction: I'm the detective *and* the criminal! I'm a person. I'm also part of an entity that is now *a geophysical force on a planetary scale*. . . . We 'civilized' people, we Mesopotamians [a reference to our twelve-thousand-year-old agricultural logic and religion], are the narrators of our destiny. Ecological awareness is that moment at which these narrators find out that they are the tragic criminal."[127] Morton is convinced that this is the precise looping or reflexive structure of our present global moment, of the uncanny Anthropocene when humans have begun to awaken to the weird fact that they are the protagonists in a novel in which they are both the criminal and the victim.

Personally speaking, I observe that this same loop structure is no doubt why, wherever I go and lecture, intellectuals routinely relate Morton's work to my own without any prompting on my part. I believe they do this because I have made the exact same loop structure central to my work on the paranormal, which I have described in different contexts as "us-screwing-with-us" or as a kind of weird physical textuality through which we might someday "author ourselves" anew (SB 243–57). Morton would call this a dark ecology. I call it authoring the impossible.

Tim Morton is hardly alone in seeing the paradoxes of the ecological thought and the haunting that is the humanities. In the first pages of his nonfiction reflections, *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh addresses modern technology—in this case, electricity—when he writes of the burning lungs and health effects of the massively polluted cities of New Delhi and Beijing. He takes this as clear evidence "that there is no difference between the without and the within; between using and being used. These too are moments of recognition, in which it dawns on us that the energy that surrounds us, flowing under our feet and through wires in our walls, animating our vehicles and illuminating our rooms, is an all-

encompassing presence that may have its own purposes about which we know nothing."[128]

"Its own purposes"? Those are fighting words in any scientific or secular arena. Still, such is "the urgent proximity of nonhuman presences" that Ghosh urges us to take seriously and reimagine in the Anthropocene, that global geological epoch in which the agency of humans becomes dominant, and devastating.[129]

To push further this paradoxical point—that there is no inside or outside, "no difference between the without and the within," and that natural forces might well possess their own uncanny intentions or purposes that may want to work with, or against, us—Ghosh writes of Delhi's first reported tornado, which he dangerously encountered as a young man on March 17, 1978, in the streets of north Delhi, as if it were eyeing *him*: "Why had I walked down a road that I almost never took, just before it was struck by a phenomenon that was without historical precedent? To think of it in terms of chance and coincidence seemed only to impoverish the experience: it was like trying to understand a poem by counting the words. I found myself reaching instead for the opposite end of the spectrum of meaning—for the extraordinary, the inexplicable, the confounding. Yet these too did not do justice to my memory of the event."[130] The natural event remained *more*. It was somehow not just *natural*, as we say with our own inadequate, and distancing, English word.

If I read Ghosh correctly, he is not telling such stories simply to entertain us. He is telling them to challenge and transform our cultural imaginations, which have been running on mechanistic and materialistic assumptions about a "dead" natural world that is there for our economic gain and exploitation; or, alternately, on theistic assumptions that place all ultimate agency and meaning in the supernatural—that is, outside or above the same natural order—which then becomes a place of absence or non-meaning. The Anthropocene and the climate crisis are unthinkable in either dualistic register, be it materialistic or theistic. We literally cannot imagine them, much less think about them critically or address them effectively. We will need entirely new ontologies and attending imaginations, like the nonhuman presences and living natural world of Amitav Ghosh, where "there is no difference between the without and the within."

Along similar lines, I have heard Ghosh speak of the most urgent need for a "vitalist metaphysics," and how some of the most powerful protest movements around the world, including those that have been literally

danced (like the famous Ghost Dance of the Lakota), have issued from exactly this kind of deep worldview, where the natural world is rhythmically alive and fiercely intentional. European colonial administrators, on the other hand, could not generally see or experience, much less acknowledge and understand, such hidden forces. Their Westernized perceptions were *literally* occluded, shut down by their materialist ideologies and commodifying intentions, much as I have argued above about how academic critique literally limits what we can know as the real and so continues to colonize and canalize our very experience of the world.[131]

Such tornadic, dancing, decolonizing thoughts spin stronger and faster yet in Ghosh's fiction. Consider *Gun Island* (2019). The novel is narrated by Dr. Dinanath Datta, or "Deen," a Bengali American who grew up in Calcutta and is now a rare book dealer with a PhD in folklore from a Midwestern American university (that is, an academically trained person not working in the academy—basically a stand-in for Ghosh himself, who possesses a PhD in anthropology). Deen finds himself uncannily involved in the elaborate transnational and postcolonial webs of human trafficking, political corruption, nationalist immigration fears, global capitalism, social media harassment, and the desires and anxieties of climate, political, and economic refugee communities. In short—our present world.

The story bounces back and forth between the Sundarbans, a swamplike mango forest on the coast of West Bengal famous for its tigers and cobras, and Venice, Italy, where much of the action takes place among the immigrant Bengali population. Central to the plot is Dinanath's professional colleague and close friend, Professorossa Giacina Schiavon of Rome, affectionately known as "Cinta" (although we are not told this, the nickname is a Sanskrit word that means "thought"). Cinta, who is a quite famous historian of Venice, lost her husband, Giacomo, a fierce investigative journalist, and her young daughter, Lucia, to the Italian Mafia, who appear to have arranged for them to be killed in a terrible car crash after Giacomo refused to shut up.

As the story goes, Cinta knew what the nineteenth-century British psychical researchers had called a "crisis apparition." In her case, it was a "crisis audition" that involved Lucia greeting her with love and affection, likely in the moment of her death many kilometers away. As in similar actual historical cases, the voice is so audible and so clear that Cinta looks around her hotel room, at first thinking that Lucia is hiding and playing a joke on her mother.[132] These entangled events are related early in the novel, but Lucia continues to "be heard" until the very last page. The living and

active presence of the dead, the *agency* of the superhuman dead, drives the argument of the novel, certainly inspires and supports one of its central characters (Cinta), and in fact functions as the story's conclusion, when Cinta passes away in order to join her daughter, whose presence she feels intensely as she herself passes over or across.

Two young Bengali men named Rafi and Tipu organize and define much of the drama, which is all about an early modern Bengali folktale involving the snake goddess Manasa Devi and her unwilling but finally succumbing devotee known simply as the Gun Merchant. Dinanath takes some pride in the result of his dissertation on this folktale cycle, a brief essay that dates one of the final literary forms of the long poem, against the received scholarly opinion, to the late seventeenth century and whose popularity, he argues, waxes considerably in times of "upheaval and disruption."[133]

As the novel develops, however, the reader gradually realizes that the old Bengali folktale is also functioning as a kind of precognitive telling of the immigrant, human trafficking, and climate crisis events of today, and that Dinanath has become a part of its retelling and reliving. His earlier scholarship has literally entered his life. Now the Gun Merchant's refusal to become a devotee of the snake goddess has become a parable about modern humanity's refusal to understand its profound relationship to the natural world and its animals, with, of course, literally disastrous consequences.[134]

Many features of this rich text perform what I have called the superhumanities.[135] Foremost among these is the novel's circular or precognitive model of temporality (with the future bending back to the past, and the past reaching forward to the future). There is also the narrator's profound sense of the story itself as uncannily alive, as living or writing us, as it were, but also as living and writing us *from the future*. Indeed, the entire novel works only because the central folktale of the snake goddess and the Gun Merchant reveals itself to be at least partly about the past precognizing the present.

Hence the narrator's profound sense of how he "had entered the dreamtime of the book," in his case, a rare illustrated Italian book in which he suspects the snake goddess had likely appeared to the historical Gun Merchant when the latter was in Venice.[136] Such secret stories, we learn, "could tap into dimensions that were beyond the ordinary, beyond the human even."[137] Why? Because storytelling comes from something deeper and more ancient than the human, something fundamentally nonhuman. Story, it turns out, can function like "the faculty that makes us turn around

when we feel the gaze of a stranger or an animal."[138] It is animalistic, instinctual, *eerie*.

Indeed, there is something about animals, insects, and the world of the sea that crawls, flies, and swims through this story. One character, for example, hears Lucia speak from the world of the dead just as a dog tragically dies while crushing the head of a poisonous sea snake.[139] Somehow, the reader guesses, the death of the dog or the snake, or both together, has somehow opened a portal. Moreover, snakes and spiders—the totemic creatures of Manasa Devi—appear at extraordinarily precise times in the narrative.

Dinanath finally has to conclude, very much against his rationalist secular training, that such creatures are not coincidences; they are somehow animating, even dreaming the events of his own life. "It wasn't so much that I was dreaming, but that I was being dreamed by creatures whose very existence was fantastical to me—spiders, cobras, sea snakes—and yet they and I had somehow become a part of each other's dreams."[140] The result is that poor Dinanath is sent into cognitive fits as he tries to hold on to his rationalism and its paltry category of chance to preserve his Western secular worldview, "clinging to it as though it were my last connection with reality."[141]

Related here is Cinta's blunt but sophisticated understanding of anomalous phenomena, including and especially precognition (a kind of noncausal causality from the future, again). Cinta in fact relies on one my favorite real-world superhumanist authors to express her views—the Italian anthropologist and folklorist Ernesto de Martino. Cinta describes de Martino as "one of the most important intellectuals of the twentieth century," but one who has been almost completely forgotten (of course). In real life, de Martino penned an important book called *The Magical World*, arguing in essence that anthropology and parapsychology are twin disciplines, and that magic can be quite real and effective. He also speculated that nature is culturally conditioned, that the physical world may behave differently in different symbolic and mythical registers (another form of my gnomon, "critique limits"). He was most famous, however, for a long study of tarantism, literally Spiderism, a Southern Italian tradition of possession and exorcism in which peasants (mostly women) dance and communicate with mythical spirits through spider bites, who *become*, as it were, occult spiders.[142] Spider-Women. Spider-Men.

Let us listen in on a conversation between Cinta and Dinanath about de Martino and tarantism. Note in particular the classic third space of the superhumanities, neither believing nor dismissing:

"You mean," I said, in disbelief, "that he [de Martino] believed that spirits and demons are real? That they can communicate with people through spider bites?"

"No, no!" said Cinta. "His argument was that we cannot start with the label of the 'supernatural,' as rationalists invariably do. They assume that unexplained forms of causation cannot *in principle* exist. Yet, as de Martino shows, there are many well-documented instances of things that cannot be explained by so-called 'natural' events."

"Like what?"

"Hmm . . ." She paused to think. "For example, foreknowledge—what they call pre-cognition nowadays. Knowing that something will occur before it does."[143]

Ghosh writes with a clear sense that such anomalous capacities are shared not only across all cultural boundaries (the telepathic Italian professor Cinta manifests them as dramatically as the cobra-bitten and entranced Bengali villager Tipu) but also *across species*. What we learn is that the uncanny capacities of humans—particularly the capacity of telling and entering stories—are nothing more, but also nothing less, than the revivified powers of the animal kingdom, perhaps "the last remnant of our animal selves."[144] Ghosh never quite says this, but it is patently clear that such powers are a part of our evolutionary endowment and communion with the animal kingdom. We are them. They are us. And we are *all* super.

So is the weather. It, too, symbolizes, expresses, materializes human emotion, intention, anxiety, and, ultimately, transformation. It, too, is a nonhuman, or superhuman, an agent of historical change.

Especially tornadoes. As the novel climaxes, so do the appearances of tornadoes, living "serpentine" ones.[145] The mythical figure of the Gun Merchant, for example, appears immediately after a tornado at a critical juncture of the novel.[146] Immediately after this, Dinanath has a dream of looking down on the Earth "through the eye of a tornado" and sees the Gun Merchant, "dressed in robes and a turban."[147] Another tornado collapses the house that is imprisoning some refugees in Egypt, including Tipu. The sudden storm kills the traffickers and frees the prisoners, who will figure prominently a few pages later. Finally, an Ethiopian woman, incarnating Manasa Devi, lifts her arms on the Blue Boat, the escape vehicle of the now freed refugees, and controls a "storm" of birds and encircling sea creatures of various species who swim in a glowing, bioluminescent ocean. At that very moment, the captain of the Italian navy, an old friend of Cinta's,

decides to take in the refugees and not turn them back for right-wing political agendas.[148] The living tornado that had sought out Amitav Ghosh in north Delhi has finally become a central actor, a nonhuman agent, in Ghosh's later novel. Real life has become true fiction.

The central message of the book is that the modern world—with its capitalism, colonialism, human trafficking, and polluting or ecological suicide—appears to be mad, possessed, but is also waking up to its actual condition. The global migrations of peoples today, however difficult and dangerous, are in fact a *reversal* of European colonialism, its enslavement and control of other peoples and their movements, and its once successful attempts to keep the European cultures and cities white.[149] No more.

Here is Cinta explaining to Dinanath (whom she affectionately calls "Dino") how to read this modern mixing and its emotional effects—with the negative and positive languages of religion, it turns out:

> She smiled in her enigmatic way. "All I can say, Dino, is that when I look at this world—our world—with the diagnostic tools of an Inquisitor, it becomes impossible to avoid a simple conclusion."
>
> "Which is . . . ?"
>
> "That the world of today presents all the symptoms of demonic possession. . . . Everybody knows what must be done if the world is to continue to be a livable place. . . . Everybody knows . . . and yet we are powerless, even the most powerful among us. We go about our daily business through habit, as though we were in the grip of forces that have overwhelmed our will; we see shocking and monstrous things happening all around us and we avert our eyes; we surrender ourselves willingly to whatever it is that has us in its power."
>
> She smiled and reached out to pat my hand. "That is why whatever is happening to you is not 'possession.' Rather I would say that it is a *risveglio*, a kind of awakening. It may be dangerous of course, but that is because you are waking up to things that you had never imagined or sensed before. You are lucky, Dino—some unknown force has given you a great gift."[150]

Some unknown force. An awakening. A great gift. Contrary to one voice within the novel dissing precognitive dreams, insisting that that stuff is really not helpful, this stuff is much more than helpful—it is the very intention or shaping force of the "chance" events; it is what drives the story and its characters forward; it is the story.[151] *Gun Island* is a text that relies on

a circular precognitive temporality to make its final but still future point, a sense that is still working its way out today in and as us, both villain and victim.

Consider, finally, the environmental activist Rachael Petersen. More to my point, consider Petersen's mystical experience on psilocybin in a research lab experiment at Johns Hopkins University (in a desperate measure to treat her clinical depression) and her subsequent essay, "Taking Mushrooms for Depression Cured Me of My Atheism."[152]

Before we get to Petersen's story, it is important to underline a superhumanist current that I have not addressed here and that is often denied, or just politely ignored, but nevertheless runs through, under, and above what we now think of as Western civilization—psychedelic mysticism. I refer to an endless series of altered states of mind and body catalyzed by psychoactive plants and molecules that have helped inspire, or just reveal, some of the most stunning and influential literature and ideas of Western civilization and, I strongly suspect, of all of human history. We are minded plants, or the plants think in us.

In any case, it is simply not possible to speak of the superhumanities without, in the same breath, implying the psychedelic humanities, which, of course, do not officially exist either. They are still there, largely invisible but nevertheless everywhere. Not only were psychoactive brews, plants, and gases likely central to ancient Greek society, Greek philosophy, and its famous Mysteries—the "chemical Muse," as the classicist D.C.A. Hillman put it.[153] Not only did the consumption of psychoactively spiked beers, wines, and plants constitute what Brian Muraresku has hymned as the "the secret history of the religion with no name" through much of the history of religions in Europe and beyond.[154] Not only was some of the finest canonical literature of English literature inspired by the same.[155] These same molecules are likely active endogenously—that is, in the human body—in everything from near-death to alien abduction experiences. If you really want to change your mind and open it up—*way* up—to transcendence, there is probably no more reliable and effective means than the growing gnosis of the plant world and its most intimate molecular relationship to that psychedelic primate—humans.[156]

Petersen's case is especially interesting for us because her God moment on a psychedelic substance did not happen in a countercultural or socially marginal context, nor in a moment of health and happiness, much less of entertainment. It happened in a medical facility at the heart of Western science and in the midst of a severe depression. It was an experience of

genuine transcendence through the most immanent and secular of catalysts: a humanly engineered mushroom molecule in a research hospital. This was the fusion of the empirical and the imaginal par excellence. A medicalized molecule and God.

Moreover, and perhaps even more telling in our context, the experience came with a clear message for facing up to a global ecological crisis and the real-time data Petersen, as an environmental activist working for a nonprofit, was watching on NASA satellite images of burning rain forests and receding habitat from Brazil to Borneo. Petersen makes the potent point that the modal Western materialist worldview can be no basis for effective environmental activism. It simply cannot work. How could it? *Such a worldview itself is depressing*. She certainly knew this on the deepest of levels as an activist, and she is convinced such a worldview played a major role in her clinical depression.

Such a flat materialist worldview is also simply mistaken about our actual cosmic condition and nature, as Petersen's psychedelic encounter with the ground of being taught her so dramatically: "At the peak of my experience, my sense of self dissolved and I unified with an abiding force that permeated all existence—something that felt conscious, vast, benevolent, eternal, peaceful, and furiously important." It was not the psilocybin that finally healed her. It was what the molecule *let in*. It was that encounter, that presence. It was God.

Talk about a vitalist metaphysics.

Humorously, and innocently, Petersen goes to Boston University to visit one of the era's most established and accomplished scholars of mysticism, Steven Katz. She went to Katz for affirmation and help. He gave her neither. Instead, Katz did what he always does and for which he has become so well known (and honored) in the humanities: he reduced her cosmic experience of God to a local historical and relative construction, a funny effect in her head, basically, her brain on drugs. This is certainly not what Petersen experienced, but it was clearly what Katz thought, and no doubt still thinks.

It is not what I think. In the light of what I have written above, I think, what really healed Rachael Petersen—and so, I take from her essay, what will heal us and, maybe someday, the ecological system—was the direct realization that she wasn't who she thought she was ("my sense of self dissolved"), that she was also something "vast, benevolent, eternal, peaceful," in short, that she was Two. She was Rachael Petersen. She was also God. She was superhuman.

ONTOLOGICAL INSURGENCY AND METAPHYSICAL REBELLION

I have had the pleasure and honor of interacting with most of the living authors discussed above. They are my colleagues, my friends. They are also the reasons I remain an optimist about the humanities. Such humankind, as Tim Morton would say, are simply extraordinary. And this is the point of this brief chapter-journey through psychoanalysis; critical race studies; postcolonial, feminist, and queer criticism; and ecological activism—that there is *no way* to affirm radical human difference, as humanist intellectuals clearly want to do, without also radically affirming ontological diversity, which they clearly do not want to do.

It is simply not enough to absorb all difference into a common (Western) secular vision of the human being as a dying self-interested social animal, as a fully embodied social actor that can be adequately explained with the materialist methods of biomedicine and the social sciences. We have to consider the possibility, really the near certainty, that our conceptions of reality are insufficient, if not woefully inadequate, *if not actually upside down and inside out*.

We have to encounter, honestly and long, the Egyptian-Greek Hermetic claim that "All is One," the physical phenomena of the saints (of *every* religion), the Buddhist distinction between conventional and ultimate truth, Nisargadatta's nondualism and its radical relativization of the social ego, the double consciousness of European Mesmerism, psychoanalysis, and critical race theory, the occult abilities of Anzaldúa's decolonial *la facultad*, Cinta's precognition and contact with the dead, and the genuine ontological revolution of mushrooms. Most of all, these ideas—and a thousand more impossible ideas—should not be shoved into our petrified religious or academic theories. They should *explode* how thought itself works, how we conceive of anything and everything. Taking up these very impossibilities, we have to challenge that which secular Western intellectuals assume to be the case, including our own moralities and values. *We have to decolonize reality itself*.

The present insistence that we are only this or that human, and that there is no such thing as the super to join or connect us all was forged originally in the universities by intellectuals under the banners of postmodernism and difference. These gave us many gifts that should not be dismissed or underestimated, but they also came with real liabilities, which we are presently suffering, including a creeping or just dominant nihilism ("there

is no truth"), severe political polarization, and the endless fracturing of the human community into tinier and tinier political, sexual, and religious identities. Ironically, our fierce focus on colonialism has itself become colonizing, and our rightful concerns about social justice have sometimes made us too intolerant and righteous. But if intellectuals helped create these problems, and we most certainly did, then we can help respond to these problems and eventually move past them.

Let me end with two final images, which might be the same image.

Rachael Petersen is a Rice alumna, whom I did not know while she was here but later came to know through her work. When I recently asked Rachael, with a group of my graduate students, if she might expand on the relationship between her depression and her mystical encounter with God, she responded by invoking the image of different rooms. She explained that it was not as if her depression somehow was cured by the psilocybin event. That is what the utilitarian journalists and quantifying medical researchers wanted to hear: they wanted something useful, something measurable. But it was not like that. It was more that she now knew—*really* knew—that her body-brain and sense of self was just one room in a much, much larger house. And it was this new ontological recontextualization, this *new scale*, that made life worth living again.

Accordingly, Rachael resists the medicalization of mysticism (the phrase goes all the way back to William James) that dominates much of the present psychedelic renaissance. She questions the wisdom of bottling and marketing these plants as yet more pharmaceuticals, more drugs for those who can afford them. She is much more interested in psychedelics as powerful forms of what she calls "ontological insurgency," that is, effective means to radically expand and deepen what is at present a superficial and fundamentally depressing Western worldview. She wants us to know, as she came to know, that our social egos, our persons, are just one room.[157]

They are not the same, but I hear a certain echoing resonance or deep oceanic signaling between Petersen's recent and urgent ontological insurgency and the metaphysical rebellion of Albert Camus in *The Rebel* (1951). I hear gnosis across the centuries.

I cannot but help be reminded also of Nietzsche's quick lines in his diaries with which I began and to which I have returned a number of times in these pages. I return to these lines because they capture so well, in a simple memorable metaphor, what I am trying to say here. Recall how these sentences, written shortly after his mystical realization in the mountains, are

about how he lives on a floor above everyone else. He thinks and writes above (*über*) us, on another floor of a shared house. The problem is that those on the floor below him want to pretend that there is nothing above them, that they are living in the only room of the house.

They are wrong. There are other rooms, and other floors. There is even an open sky above the house in which there is no separation, distinction, or difference. Perhaps that is what I most want to say here at the end. The room you live in, the room your social ego and identity *are*, is just one room in a much, much larger human house, which is itself an expression of a fantastic living nonhuman or superhuman cosmos. And that is reason, perhaps the biggest reason of all, to take joy.

CONCLUSION

The Solid Rock Was Once Flowing

> Joy indeed would be that simplicity of life diffused throughout the world by an ever-spreading mystic intuition; joy, too, that which would automatically follow a vision of the life beyond [physical death] attained through the furtherance of scientific experiment. . . . But, whether we go bail for small measure or great, a decision is imperative. Mankind lies groaning, half crushed beneath the weight of its own progress. Men do not sufficiently realize that their future is in their own hands. Theirs is the task of determining first of all whether they want to go on living or not. Theirs the responsibility, then, for deciding if they want merely to live, or intend to make just the extra effort requiring for fulfilling, even on their refractory planet, the essential function of the universe, which is a machine for the making of gods.
>
> HENRI BERGSON, LAST LINES OF HIS LAST BOOK, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*

It is time to conclude. I wish to do so by saying something about our present questions and confusions and relating them to the answers of our cultural pasts, even as we also naturally and inevitably orient those present questions to what look increasingly like some very different futures. It is time to settle down, even if that settling down is in truth a preparation for other journeys.

Is not this double movement how the human species colonized and settled this planet, from Africa to Europe, Asia, Australia, and the Americas over the last 100,000 years or so? We settled. And we left. We settled. And we left. There is no such thing as a single stable humanity, or any place, land, or truth that is home to all. Except the Earth itself. Here we are all indigenous, we are all native. As a species on this singular planet, though, we do not stay anywhere for long, and yet, as individuals, we must, if only for the briefest of time.

Then we move on again, to Henri Bergson's "life beyond," of whose nature we have endless hints and beliefs in the historical deposits but no settled shared answers, much less progressive scientific experiments. We have not even begun to address that other life in any sustained and

systematic way. As repeatedly noted above, this is the question that cannot be asked, since it assumes the relative inconsequence of precisely that which the humanities take to be our most important and distinguishing features—the body and its historically constructed social identities.

But what if we are not finally our bodies, histories, or social identities?

I sometimes worry that my colleagues think I dwell so much on the extraordinary aspects of religion because I spend my days floating from one altered state to another, or because I think this is how the religions or our lives work: just one marvel after another.

I do not live like that. I enjoy no such floating. And I think no such thing. My life is probably a lot like yours—a baffling mixture of distraction, frustration, exhaustion, and work, mixed, thankfully, with a few moments of physical pleasure, an occasional quiet expression of human affection and love, a smile and a laugh, and a most imperfect sense of community.

Still, because I enjoy the benefits of a large extended family, an elite education, relative economic security, being a white straight male in this relative culture, and more than a little of what feels like sheer stupid luck, I do not suffer socially, much less physically like my immediate Moravian Czech and German agricultural ancestors did, or so much of the planet does today. But I very well might someday. And I will die, either miserably or quietly, either slowly or suddenly, either soon or not so soon.

For now, I slog through. Not very well. Most of the time things look pretty grim, to be perfectly honest. I also hear a good deal from my graduate students about how they have "lost faith" in the liberal vision and higher education in general. I think some of them think my writings on the superhuman are a bit naive, or at least much too optimistic. They are intellectually depressed, if not emotionally depressed, like almost every other thinking human being on the planet. Look around. How could they *not* be?

And that is why I write of the fantastic, the weird, the extraordinary. This is also why I think the study of religion should hold a privileged place in the humanities: because religion has long been about the willed effort to name, integrate, and actualize the superhuman in a hundred thousand ways. Put simply, *the superhuman currents of the history of religions and now of the humanities are special precisely because we are not.* Basically, we need the superhumanities to remind us in our boredom and dullness of who we might yet be, of who, if Nietzsche was right, we can and *will* yet

become: "the humans who were overcome were themselves the fathers of the superhumans. Thus do I teach and do not grow weary of it: humans are something that must be overcome: for behold, I know that they *can* be overcome—I saw them, the superhumans."[1]

"Fathers of the superhumans." Nietzsche is clearly addressing the biological and sexual realism of his futurism. The academic will no doubt invoke the typical immunological response here (get rid of the men, especially the fathers). Indeed, even a figure like Carl Jung mocked the biological, sexual, and evolutionary realism of Nietzsche's esoteric Superman. For him, at least, the Superman must be "entirely symbolic," that is, "it rings like something which does not merely mean the man of tomorrow whose tail is a bit shorter or whose ears are no longer pointed, a man who looks like a Greek god or something of the sort."[2] In the same psychologizing move, Jung will also make fun of Nietzsche's "bachelor psychology," that is, his philosophical, really esoteric, understanding of marriage and procreation as leading to the Superman.[3] But Nietzsche is *not* being metaphorical. He is talking about sex. Actually, he is talking about procreative sex.[4]

As a childless man and gifted author, he is also implicitly talking about ideas, visions, philosophy, and books—he is talking about a culture *that can be passed on via intention and expression*. And this, for me anyway, is what I think faith, belief, and indeed culture itself are, at their very best anyway. They are about this *not* being super in the present but remembering how some of our ancestors once were and intuiting that some of our children, their children, and their children's children might yet be.

And must this Nietzschean language of "being overcome" be so negative, so depressing again? Is it not perfectly true? Is not this who we are, how we live, and why we die—*precisely* to be overcome? And do we not know *far* more (if hardly enough) than Nietzsche's generation did about the invisible structures of this overcoming eros with the discovery of DNA, its still inexplicable "written" nature, and the endlessly complex ways that intention, desire, practice, culture, and now medical technology, that is, human *will* can bend back on its transmission and so influence the future directions of how these hidden codes express themselves and so write us anew? Are we not today pretty much exactly what the biologist and evolutionary humanist Julian Huxley said we were—evolution becoming more and more conscious of itself?[5] We have become, in effect, our own biological gods—more and more aware that our body-brains are not local production factories but transmission stations of the life and consciousness of the cosmos.

Here we approach, still at a distance, what Nietzsche called the "noontide," when the gods are all finally integrated into the self and no longer projected outside of it. This is what Jung got more or less right about Nietzsche, even if it is not at all clear for Jung if this direct noontide shining is a good or a bad thing: "But then he has lost the gods and there is the danger of inflation, of identification with the image of the divine, and then he has to realize the Superman. The Superman would be the superconsciousness and this is now the problem. What is this superconsciousness that has integrated even those psychological facts which formerly were projected as gods? What happens then to consciousness and what will that Superman be?"[6] In his more generous moments, Jung realizes that the Superman is not the ego glorified or inflated but something closer to the Self or *atman* of Indian philosophy, that is, precisely *not* the ego but the other far side of what I have called the Human as Two.[7]

This, of course, is also the question that should be asked of the humanities: If we have realized that the gods have always been us, *now what*?

And we should not be so certain of our answer.

THE MAGIC OF SOCIETY AND THE EPIGENETICS OF EDUCATION

Obviously, this being overcome is also about more than sexual desire and reproduction. It is also about *social practice*. And here, too, society and religion—that is, the ways we externalize ourselves and so pass on ourselves—appear to be central. As the historian of religions Robert Campany has argued with respect to the *xian* or immortal transcendents of ancient China, it is the social base that makes such supernormal attainments possible to imagine at all (and presumably to obtain). Campany quotes the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss to make his own point: "It is because society becomes activated that magic works."[8]

Society *is* magic. Society is a séance, conjuring reality as that society defines and delimits the real.[9] Critique limits. Accordingly, such social magic can work *either way*: it can express *or* suppress the superhuman. There is no such thing as a non-magical society, but there is definitely such a thing as anti-magic magic. "Do not trust those who analyze magic," Bruno Latour warned. "They are usually magicians in search of revenge."[10] Society is a magical battle, then, and we all are empowered, and disempowered, by the culture in which we live, by which we have been formed, and through which we come into consciousness and think we are who we are (but are not).

If society is a magical battle, though, then so is higher education, which is nothing more and nothing less than an elite expression of Euro-American society and, I would add, an acute experimentation into that society's futures.

Evolution ain't what it used to be. It looks increasingly like culture, language, and human intention will shape and determine the future of the evolution of the species and the fate of the planet, for better and for worse. What do you think the expression "the Anthropocene" implies? *We* are now the major evolutionary force on the planet. This is what the Age of the Human means. And the stakes could not be higher. To employ a contemporary biological term, it looks more and more as though human culture, language, and education are epigenetic—expressions of our previous material, biological, and mental evolution that loop back on that earlier evolution and influence its future within a kind of meta-move, curl, reflexive loop, or flip. We are evolving ourselves now through culture. We are authoring ourselves through education. Again (is it possible to repeat this too often?), we are evolution becoming conscious of itself.[11]

Talk about a magical battle. Talk about a will to power.

Depression, deconstruction, and all naysaying aside, we have the magic and the power in the humanities, if only we will claim them, if only we will also have the intention. The real challenge, the quantum physicist Harald Atmanspacher once wrote to me, is not to turn the humanities into pale imitations or weak reflections of the sciences and their specific ways of knowing. Rather, "the real challenge is to reconcile what science has discovered over the last 100 years with what was forgotten in the humanities."[12]

Forgotten. But so easily remembered, if only we know what to remember. Hence the superhumanities as I have named and celebrated them in these pages. We so need them because there are other stranger humanities, and so other stranger realities, to which we do not normally have access but appear often enough in people's lives, particularly in moments of suffering, death, and danger. There are graced, gifted, and traumatized people who are *not* like the rest of us. There are people who are just *different* and have special abilities or capacities that the rest of us do not have, or have not actualized. What if these powers could be acknowledged, theorized, cultivated, and then taught in new institutions of higher learning? And what if we could use these powers toward beneficent and positive personal and social ends, perhaps even to ultimate ones that extend beyond our physical deaths into a further cosmic evolution, as Bergson so boldly imagines in my concluding epigraph?

I hope that all sounds familiar. None of it is really new. This, after all, is the basic promise of religion that Martin Riesebrodt wrote about with such rhetorical grace and sociological precision. The promise of religion for Riesebrodt, recall, is based on the premise or belief that superhuman potentials exist in us and can be awakened in some gifted individuals through ascetic or disciplinary techniques or, I would add here after my own long ethnographic wanderings, through random life events mostly of a very scary nature.

One does not have to accept a specific religion's framing of such human abilities or the precise outlines of its own ultimate purpose, of course, but that is the premise (we are superhumans), and that is the promise (we will become more and more superhuman). And both are remarkably consistent across centuries and continents, as Riesebrodt and a thousand other historians, sociologists, and anthropologists have demonstrated over and over again, if we read their works comparatively *together*. This does not make any one of these promises correct or final, of course, but it does tell us something very important about our shared global superhumanity and its social magics.

Implicit here, of course, is the argument that the fantastic worlds of the history of religions are not simply products of fantasy or mechanisms of authority and power but are based on the actual experiences of human beings, who appear to have some *empirical* access to the deepest structures of the cosmos and the nature of the superhuman. This, indeed, has been precisely my argument, at once immanent (since "experience" presumes immediacy) and transcendent (since such immanent experiences repeat themselves through space and time and display recognizable patterns and similarities that are neither local nor relative). The whole thesis of the superhumanities presumes, relies on this empirical access to a shared cosmos and its imaginal translation or mediation and later stabilization in the very different magics of culture and society—in belief, ritual, scripture, hagiography, folklore, art, music, architecture, literature, science, and, some day I hope, in the humanities themselves.

WHY THE AGNOSTIC RESPONSE IS THE WRONG RESPONSE

We certainly have a long way to go, and nothing is guaranteed. I cannot tell you how many times I have heard an otherwise admired colleague say something like, "Well, it does not really matter if Joseph of Cupertino flew up into the tree after a scream, or if Teresa of Avila floated off the floor as her sisters piled on top of her to avoid a social embarrassment. What mat-

ters is how the popular belief in such presumed levitations was disciplined, controlled, and maintained by the Church and later constructed as sanctity and as a saint." Here is another doozy: "I do not care if the psychedelic trip leads a person to an actual encounter or identity with the personal Source or Ground of the universe. That does not matter. What matters are the institutional and now medical structures built up around such a belief and their social production of medicine and religion."

Really? I want to pull my hair out in such moments (and I don't have much hair left). A super-pious Italian man ecstatically flies into a tree and has to be retrieved with a ladder, or a raptured Spanish nun cannot keep herself on the floor in front of some visiting noblewomen, *and these physical events do not matter to you*? Uh, excuse me, if either of those things actually happened (and our historical records suggest strongly that they did), such anomalous events change pretty much *everything* we thought we knew about human consciousness and its relationship to physics, gravity, and material reality. Either single event would fundamentally change our entire order of knowledge. *And you don't care?*

Don't you find that disinterest just a little bit perverse? Just a little too convenient? Don't you smell your own ideology on the flat chessboard? I do. You are piling on Teresa with the nuns, holding her down to avoid a social scandal. Shame on you. Get off the levitating woman. Let her float. Let her fly. Let the real be what it sometimes is—rapturous.

As I explained in chapter 2, I know the immunological responses and moral objections of the intellectual body to such impossible scenes. I have heard them all, and many times. In truth, there are not so many of them, and they are utterly predictable, mechanical, machine-like. They repeat themselves over and over again, as if they were not so sure of themselves, as if repetition somehow equals truth.

It does not.

The most sophisticated and generous of these common responses might be captured under the rubric of agnosticism. Its basic rule is this: Do not deny, but do not affirm. Do not say no *or* yes.

There are good reasons for such a hesitation and humility, including the difficult fact that such superhuman powers often appear in and around mental illness and intense psychosocial suffering. And, yes, the superhuman and the psychopathological can appear *together* (I suspect that the former appears *through* the latter), and do so all the time. But, in the doubled vision advanced in the pages above, the suffering person is *never* just a "schizophrenic" or "depressive," is *never* identical to a diagnostic category—the person is also a piece and particle of God, a soul, to speak

theologically, manifesting in some very powerful if also, yes, very confused and confusing ways.

Perhaps the most common reason they are resisted, however, is the fact that these same apparent powers and ontological promises tend to ossify and become exclusive of one another. What people have believed to have been real, and with utter sincerity, has been transformed, again and again, into an all-encompassing ritual, institutional, and political system that has necessarily and logically excluded most of the planet in order to include a tiny minority (or a large majority). In essence, through the religions, we have weaponized the impossible. This is one of the legitimate reasons for the contemporary humanist's caution.

The argument goes as follows: "It is better not to make any claim on the real, since we know that such claims in the past have been wrong or partial, and that endless injustices and violences have been done in their names. We do not do metaphysics, because metaphysics always leads to bad things."

But such a claim, of course, is itself a metaphysics, and it is doing bad things as you read these lines. It is reducing the human to the only human, to a dying social animal that has every reason to despair and turn to endless distractions, which themselves have some pretty devastating moral consequences.

My argument rather goes like this: We must imagine other ontologies, new realities, not just because our sciences already are doing this but also because, if we do not reimagine the real, the dials will simply reset and return to where they are now—to a materialist reductionism—and the humanities will continue to be sidelined and ignored as so much depression, which they have in effect become.

Agnosticism is the position to not take a position. It is noble and understandable enough, but it will not work. The problem is that any such refusal to make a different claim on the real, however moral it might seem, simply ends up, in practice, supporting business as usual. The refusal to do ontology is itself a surrender to the present reigning ontology.

EVOLUTION AND COSMIC LOVE

I trust it is clear by now that imagining new realities does not mean trusting our present (or past) cultures and religions. I hope it is obvious that I take the suspicions of the conventional humanities about ontological claims and attending oppressive social structures as seriously as I take our need to trust the superhuman claims of the traditions and rewrite the real

for ourselves today. I am as much a child of Enlightenment reason as I am of Romantic imagination. I am both. So are the superhumanities proposed in these pages.

Consider what we now call, much too clunkily, the world religions and all the exclusive, and rather silly, religious identities these religions presently leave in their wake. To put the problem in its starkest terms, a levitating Joseph really and truly thought that he levitated because Jesus was the only Son of God and the Blessed Virgin was his mother (and was a virgin). Joseph also no doubt believed, and certainly the Church that supported and eventually sainted him believed, that the exclusive divinity of Christ and the immaculate virginity of Mary were universal truths for all of humanity.

They are not. Mary was no virgin. And you don't need Jesus or Mary to float. Period. Flying and floating, whether in spirit or in body (the empirical-imaginal again), is a universal theme in world religion, mythology, folklore, and cultural tradition, and it is just as prevalent with women.[13] It is everywhere in the modern ufological literature, too, by the way, and I do not mean this in any metaphorical or safe way. And, no, it does not appear to be just a subjective fantasy, although it is sometimes that, too, of course.

So how do we negotiate this relationship between our exclusive, often hateful, pasts and presents and what we hope is a much more inclusive superhuman future? In order to begin an answer, allow me one final example of just such a negotiation, that of the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941).

Bergson was a consummate thinker of the Human as Two. Indeed, his last book was titled *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932). In one of his numerous ruminations, Bergson observes in classical superhumanist fashion that we can think about institutional or public religion, or what he called "static religion," as "the crystallization, brought about by a scientific process of cooling, of what mysticism had poured, while hot, into the soul of man. Through religion all men get a little of what a few privileged souls possessed in full."[14]

What do such privileged souls know? Because they are so deeply aligned with what Bergson called the *élan vital*, the evolutionary impulse or creative movement of the universe, they know what G. William Barnard calls "the superconscious evolutionary energy" that is "ceaselessly active within us, *as us*."[15] They know something of what Bergson himself called "*a vague and formless being, whom we may call, as we will,* man *or* superman," who "*had sought to realize himself* [in the innumerable species of biological evo-

lutionary history], *and had succeeded only abandoning a part of himself on the way*."[16] Put a bit differently, every biological species on the planet is both an expression and a delimitation of the evolutionary force, including, of course, Homo sapiens.

It is thus a mistake to confuse this particular primate and partly accidental form—humanity "as we have it before our eyes," as Bergson put it—with that which was "prefigured in the evolutionary movement." It is in the other "vague and formless being" sense that Bergson held "humanity to be the ground of evolution."[17] Put in my own terms, it is not that the cosmos is human in any species sense—that is, in the sense of this or that human body, person, and culture. It is that the cosmos is conscious, and humans are gifted by the evolutionary impulse to have a most rare and special access to the filtering or neurobiological expression of this cosmic consciousness.[18]

Bergson rightly asked whether such an evolutionary energy or hot mystical experience is simply the religious doctrine of the place and time retraced "in characters of flame" or whether the hot flow of lived mystical experience is the original source of what later will cool, crystallize, and so become the religious doctrine and institution of the place and time.[19] Today we know these two options in the comparative study of mysticism as, roughly, constructivism and essentialism. Bergson recognized the truths of both positions, although he put the emphasis on the latter essentialist position. Most humanist intellectuals today would only accept the constructivist position—they know nothing, and want nothing, of any "evolutionary energy" or cosmic and universal *élan vital*. God forbid.

I once traveled to Hawaii for a conference appearance. I was deeply moved by the Big Island, an immense rock that literally flows into the sea as it builds more of itself from an ancient and long process of heating and cooling. I would now update Bergson with a related but more developed metaphor. I would say that the initial flowing lava of anomalous or parapsychological experience cools and hardens into hard black rock, that is, into traditional morality and religion. Still, the lava was once molten, the flowing expression of an actual eruption. To extend the metaphor further, we might say that every ancient civilizational island was created by innumerable such volcanic eruptions and these most ancient cycles of heating and cooling.

There are two sources of both morality and religion, then: (1) those hardened and stable or static forms of social morality and religious belief and practice that we know so well and have come to identify with civilization, and which are now the sole objects of the humanities and (2) those

evolving, flowing, ecstatic, and parapsychological dimensions of consciousness that the mystic knows so well, sometimes as "God," and that Bergson identified with his creative evolution and *élan vital* that will eventually result in a "divine humanity."[20]

Unsurprisingly, Bergson also identified the "pure consciousness" or "pure creative activity" of the *élan vital*, ideally freed from the restraints or "laws" of matter, as a kind of "superconsciousness."[21] Although such a superconsciousness can never quite fully reveal itself in the human form, by trying, it constantly pushes the human being to transcend its material, cognitive, and social limitations. Accordingly, the prefix for *super-* will multiply in Bergson's texts as "super-intellectual," "super-social," and "super-rational."[22]

Then there are the furthest reaches of morality, a second morality that Bergson distinguishes from the first, the "duties" or mores of society. He called this second or other morality "love"; he associates it with the mystics and insists that it is fundamentally different than any social morality, since it is extended to all of humanity and not just this or that religious, national, or ethnic community. It is global, not local. It is a "stream flowing down," a love "which is in each of them an entirely new emotion, capable of transposing human life into another tone."[23]

It would be easy to dismiss such a love as so much human emotion, even as redirected hormones (I can hear the physicalist thinking), but that is most certainly not what Henri Bergson is writing about in such lines. He is much closer to the ancient Neoplatonic sense of a cosmic *eros* that we encountered in chapter 3, a super-real force that ecstatically manifests or emanates all there is and eventually takes all there is back to the manifesting, emanating, erotic One Source. He is writing ontologically, not psychologically or physiologically.

We are also in the realm of an ultimate human experience of endless beneficence and universal goodness—a "fifth love" that is complete, transcendent, and unconditional, as human beings have been experiencing and reporting for eons.[24] We can ignore such honest confessions but only, it seems to me, at our own great loss. Yes, we must speak of evil and injustice and take seriously how what we call the mystical and the moral need not be connected in human experience, how each can manifest independently. But we must also speak of goodness and love and take seriously the possibility that the mystical and the moral may well appear together and be but two perspectival sides of the same hyperdimensional reality. *Everything*, after all, is connected—"entangled," as humanists are beginning

to imagine and think—in the new quantum real.[25] Yes, we must delight in the Two, in difference and multiplicity, but we must also not look away from the global human experience of unity and the One (God). It can all, or All, be so.

Finally, lest the reader think that Bergson was being too idealistic with his surprising erotic vision of cosmic love, that his evolutionary esotericism or parapsychological vitalism was somehow necessarily "fascist" (that is the most common immunological response to such ideas of cosmic progress), consider how he died. Henri Bergson died of pneumonia, which he caught standing in the rain to register as a Jew in Nazi-occupied France. The Nazis had given him a way out of his most difficult predicament as an "honorable Aryan." He was, after all, as famous as any European in his era. The Nazis had reason to protect him. But Bergson refused their offer. And he died for that moral refusal.

We, of course, no longer read Bergson much. That is how we made him depressing again—by ignoring him. Why read someone who thought so ecstatically about cosmic evolution, its relationship to mystical literature, psychical research, and quantum mechanics (all of which he thought of as the most promising sources of true philosophy), and, most of all, about a future godlike human species that the *élan vital* or divine love of the cosmos would create out of its own inherent freedom? Surely, it must be about something else, something dark and bad.

Bergson, of course, understood the criticisms and the challenges. He knew how to negotiate the superhuman conversation. He knew perfectly well that the challenge before us is to appreciate *both* the original flowing lava (the phenomenological reality and evolutionary impulse of the mystical experiences of divine love) *and* the hardened, cooled rock (the cross-generational importance or sustainability of civilization and its established religious institutions, social systems, belief structures, and practice manuals). Nor did he confuse or conflate the two. He also knew that it was not at all obvious how to translate the evolutionary love of the great mystic into the hard realities of political and social life. He let the Human be Two. He was no naïf.

Nor am I. I hope it is obvious enough now: in order to affirm, assess, and integrate both the flowing lava and the hardened rock of the islands on which we have lived for millennia, we very much need the superhumanities. We need society *and* its magic. We need culture *and* the consciousness it encodes. We need the cooled rock *and* the molten lava. We need suspicion *and* trust. We need the moral no *and* the ecstatic yes.

Without a clear understanding of both the human and the super, we will simply fail to assess the true nature of the islands on which we are now living and the cosmic ocean from which they gradually emerged in a thousand thousand undersea explosions. We will continue to imagine that our island is the only island, and that the rock is just rock. We will not know that the rock once flowed and, no doubt, will flow again.

EPILOGUE
Phoenix Rising

> What if time worked like this; what if the voice in your head were a future you, a being who knew you for what you'd become?
>
> ALANA EISENBARTH, *The Girl Who Thought She Was God*

Alana Eisenbarth writes fictionally but experientially—which is to say, imaginally and empirically—of an apocalyptic future that is also a revelation and an ascension beyond what she calls the Human. Her textual descriptions are those of "Aurora," the central literary voice of her tetralogy of metaphysical novels, *Aurora of the Philosophers*, and a likely allusion to Jacob Boehme's central proto-evolutionary esoteric work, *Aurora*. Still, it is perfectly obvious that these are also the experiences of "Alana Eisenbarth." Both are true. The Human is Two.

AURORA SPEAKS

Eisenbarth's doubled work is deeply informed by Nietzsche (and Jacob Boehme and Nag Hammadi and William Blake), even as it takes her own vision in some very contemporary feminist, ecological, and, above all, gnostic directions. Eisenbarth writes powerfully out of her own gnostic experiences of the *Übermensch*, of the evolution of consciousness, of Time as Two (as both linear and all-at-once), of white ashen nuclear apocalypse on some threatened horizon, and, finally, of real "ascension" into some kind of nonhuman form.

And all this takes place within a radical monistic ontology in which all the beauty of the world, all the wars, all the singing birds, and the divine itself are entirely "yours." In one of the many striking monistic lines of her books, Eisenbarth points out that no one will forgive you for all of this, simply because there is no other to forgive, and so there is no forgiveness.[1]

The latter notion of forgiveness, along with things like "sin" and "judgment," are profoundly dualistic notions, and they are simply not so. They correspond to nothing. Within this same nondual transmoral logic, Eisenbarth will sometimes actually use the word *nondual*. More often, her lyrical

prose encodes it. "We are what evolves us." "There is only God."[2] That sort of thing.

The same ontological revelation, when expressed through a gifted writer, results in all kinds of literary and philosophical paradoxes. One of them is Aurora's complex notion of embodiment, which is also a kind of nonembodiment. Put simply, we are not (just) our bodies. "What is body to one sky to the other," she asks (without a question mark).[3] The pure sky of consciousness (above the house of many floors, I would add) knows nothing of difference.

In other places, she shifts the notion of embodiment to something more cosmic and gnostic: the real body is the "body of all." "To recognize that we are not the body but that the body is an apparatus and extension of our thoughts is to rise above form into what is not bound to physical law, what is free of the hypostasis of the archons. What is the body of all."[4]

In other places, Aurora will sound downright Hindu, with the body now a garment that one can put on and take off (through multiple reincarnations, I assume). She also sounds vaguely, or explicitly, Nietzschean: "Human is a body you inhabit, a garment, a city to be burned. . . . Never adapt for lower Human, or conform. . . . Stretch my skull. Come. Make it impossible for me to be small."[5] For to be "Human again" is to be "a shell, a body with a job, not mine."[6]

Perhaps most radically of all are those moments in the texts when the body is revealed as something that we have created by our beliefs and imaginal powers and then got tricked by. "I am consciousness. What I am conscious of exists as a body, a world grown out of beliefs. Our error was in identifying ourselves with the form and so becoming entrapped by it, contained."[7] In other places, the body becomes a Platonic or Hermetic body that is emanated or radiated from the Good and the Beautiful: "an emanation of the beautiful, the divine, chose as we would choose unconsciously to express beauty in a form, love a form, ourselves a form."[8]

In short, Alana Eisenbarth, or Aurora, is a classical gnostic thinker, pulling from everything and everyone—ancient Gnostic, Hindu, Neoplatonic, Nietzschean texts, it doesn't matter—in her social surround to express her own transcendent revelation, her own apocalypse of thought. The point is not to be perfectly consistent (being a body-brain renders that impossible anyway). The point is to speak *from above*. The common statements, then, about not being a body while in a body are a function of a basic epistemological and ontological fact, namely, the fantastic "disparity between phenomena and the spiritual realm."[9] There is conventional truth, and there is ultimate truth, and they cannot be easily related, not in

any human grammar or conventional language anyway. Two entirely different floors.

And a sky.

Not that the body is not also God, does not hold its own evolutionary secrets. As with the ancient Hermetic texts, *everything* is God.

I am especially struck here by Aurora's obvious but never quite named kundalini awakening, which she describes in significant detail, particularly as it slithers around the belly, the heart, the throat, and the cave of the brain, including "these plates in the head moving tectonic."[10] Aurora's is a powerful fusion of ancient Christian Gnosticism and the Hindu Tantra, whether these systems are named or not.[11] Aurora is also perfectly aware of the phallic meanings of the snake (in both the Gnostic Garden and the Hindu Tantra again), including in actual sexual intercourse: "I am she. And I am not afraid to claim you in thighs that wrap the world and coddle the head of the serpent."[12]

The elaborate descriptions of Aurora certainly reproduce in nearly every detail the familiar physiological markers of a kundalini awakening, of this "ecstatic pulse of electrified joy." As in India (and Gloria Anzaldúa), the awakening is compared to a snake, "a rattler that slips up my arm and unfurls in my skull."[13] As also the throat chakra or the "bridge in my throat."[14] Hence her description of being shot twice by a seraphic angel in the throat, like this: "An arrow shot into the throat clears the passage, establishing a bridge between realms."[15]

The same total experience was accompanied by spontaneous or "possessed" *kriya* movements of her body, which she quite appropriately compares to the six-armed goddess Durga (thus honoring the Bengali or northeastern Indian cultural expressions of this classical Tantric awakening). Just as interesting, she writes of a physical energy that moves "elliptically" and of a bodily felt "egg of joy." Something at the base of her eyeballs pulls "into rotation" as she feels "an orb in my skull" begin to "spin vertically, tipping me forward, my eyeballs jerking in resistance, and my head vibrating from the speed until I am slipping, the egg still circulating through my hands, the orb still revolving everything in movement."[16]

The latter are most striking lines, since they match in uncanny detail what the scholar of Indian Tantra or Chinese Daoist practice would immediately recognize as a kind of orbital meditation. I did, anyway.[17] I am even more struck by the obvious resonances here with the extensive discussions of the orbital energies of the esoteric human form in the writings of the American guru and spiritual teacher Adi Da, born Franklin Jones (1939–2008).[18]

Significantly, it is the same internal serpent that is "the gift" that evolves us, that really evolves itself, "supplanting with fervor a species that one might become."[19] The serpent that slides through Aurora's body and into her head, jaw, and skull plates is the evolutionary force itself, the power that arrives to end a world: "Some of us have snakes in our bellies. Some of us have come for the end."[20] We think of Gloria.

As in the ancient Gnostic texts of the Nag Hammadi library, the biblical Eden or Garden myth is turned on its head, reversed, and now reread in light of Aurora's own kundalini awakening through the serpent's gift:

> We had gotten it wrong. At the end was a snake and a woman with the courage to awaken not to the tale as they'd told it, but how it was, Adam complacent in the dream, she one with God, a serpent unfurling and coiling in her heart rising and tilting her waters over what was trickling down in a deluge, saying to me come. . . .
>
> We are what evolves us. The serpent unites us with God. . . .
>
> The snake was an aspect of God in the self, an initiation which Adam hadn't the courage to engage. The idea was to know ourselves divided and to grow.
>
> It was not about Man and his helper, male and female, good and bad, but about the beginning of a human journey, about Human dreaming something into existence, something of a self in love. For here we are the Garden and the God and the promise of the snake; God wanting to know itself, God's emanation. Separation and nexus, nonduality through dual form, what strives, a snake cut, ouroboros. God? I see you. God. A tree.
>
> I have lived two thousand years this one.[21]

There is indeed a "fall" in the gnostic rereading of the myth, but it had nothing to do with a piece of fruit, a sexual act (which is what "eating the fruit" anciently symbolized), or some vague disobedience or moral fault. It was all about "our forgetting the God in us."[22] It is time now to tell another tale, to dream another myth.

Predictably, the well-meaning Adam of Aurora's life can only tell her to suppress what she is experiencing, has only a pharmaceutical response to the serpent rising in her head. "Baby, take something."[23] Medicate it away. Go back to sleep.

Aurora's understanding of time is just as radical as her understanding of (non)embodiment and its evolutionary energies. She explicitly invokes Nietzsche's eternal recurrence "from a higher plane" and the powers of a biological-spiritual evolution, which is "what makes me other inside."[24]

The basic paradoxical, recursive, or loop-like plotline of the first book is described by Eisenbarth as follows: "A conversation with Conscience, whom Aurora posits is the self in ascension or a future self (a definition that will grow as her understanding grows), leads to the dissolution of time. Aurora is presented with a prophetic book, coming to the end of which she finds herself to be writing. Alone and covered in ash on what could be the surface of a planet destroyed, she becomes conscious of herself as a primordial spirit in the presence of the divine."[25]

What is striking here is how Eisenbarth's Aurora expresses so clearly both the Human as Two and Time as Two. She is perfectly aware, for example, that the ego grounds the person, but that the person has "access to the future as well as to the past." This latter form of subjectivity is crystallized in the fictional figure of Conscience, literally "with knowledge."

It is not about right and wrong, we are told, and it never was. It is about this Conscience communicating with itself from the future to the past, guiding, teaching, transmitting things to its younger self. This is what the author calls the "conflation of time, this reaching out, the presence of self in self." Aurora asks Conscience the obvious question: "But how is that possible? If Conscience is the voice of the future self revisiting the past self through the mind, wouldn't this change everything?"[26]

Of course it would.

And what changes includes a kind of pulling back or reintegration of a specific and traditional projection, the projection called God. Aurora is encouraged to believe in such a God at the beginning of her journey, for it names a transcendent presence that in fact exists, but she must finally realize that there is no such separate God and that "its powers are her own."[27] As Conscience has it more simply and starkly later in the book and its journey: "What we were told about God was all wrong."[28]

There's an understatement.

The Girl Who Thought She Was God, then, should not be answered with the typical secular or reductive answer: "Of course, the girl was mistaken. She is only human. She is only a girl." No. The question of the title should be answered this way: "Well, she really *was* God." Or better, the book should be titled *The God Who Thought It Was a Girl*.

And was.

The meaning of human life logically follows. The Nietzschean "ape" on the tightrope to be left behind for the superhumans on the other end of the same rope appears again, here as a "monkey" to be moved: "Your task, your mission is to seek yourself into existence and so grow God, grow our capabilities, our power in intention, for what proceeds now does so in

chaos. . . . There is so much we cannot fathom in our current state to push it might extend our form, might evolve our species, that the conception of space might be fathomable. Evolution, ascension, call it what you will, we are here to expand to grow. . . . Let us move the monkey. Don't you want to grow?"[29]

Note the empirical punch: that "the conception of space might be fathomable." Eisenbarth's reflections on Time as Two are no less striking. Both temporal dimensions (linear and all-at-once) are true. Everything is indeed "happening simultaneously now, and yet at the same time sequentially, for this is how a brain orders and makes sense of the world." But the latter temporality is finally to be overcome as the lesser truth: "But that something in the future could indeed affect the past and is constantly affecting the past, for everything is always touching, intersecting, and in growth, that in looking backward and forward there is no longer backward or forward but a matrix, a web of life that expands outward from a point, depending on from which point it is examined. Meaning grows as the mind makes connections, compiles and assembles and grows."[30] The truth is this: "All exists at one time."[31] Which is to say, *everything* is connected.

We have heard that one before, because it is true.

THE EMAILS, OR XMAILS

My profound interest in, really reverence for, the *Aurora of the Philosophers* series—which, as far as I can tell, remains completely unstudied—began, as I explained in the introduction, with an email from a superhuman, in this case Alana Eisenbarth herself. The email was playfully titled "Phoenix: 'I thought it was time we talked.'" Phoenix here is a reference to the Marvel Comics X-Men character who is easily the most powerful mutant of all, capable of destroying entire planets, if not the universe itself with her mind alone (if "mind" is what you want to call this unimaginable cosmic conscious Presence).

The email began with a discussion of Alana's papers for two upcoming academic conferences, the first on "Conflagration and the Countercultural Rise to Cosmic Consciousness through *Pistis Sophia* and X-Men's Phoenix." *Pistis Sophia* (Faith Wisdom) is a well-known and early translated Gnostic text from the first few centuries of the Common Era. What Alana was basically doing in these papers was comparing early Gnostic Christianity and American countercultural science fiction, much as my colleague

April DeConick has done, but here in a much more autobiographical, if still "fictional" fashion.[32]

Alana was also expressing, as DeConick has again, a most revolutionary spirituality from the ancient world to today that fundamentally rejects all the orthodox or conventional "servant spiritualities" that must bow down or kneel before an endless parade of imaginary kings, lords, and male gods in the sky. Such gnostic spiritualities reject the way of the servant and insist instead on the person's own divine authority and power. We think of Nietzsche.

In the emails, Alana was writing to challenge me, to push back on my call for this or that moral action. She was writing not "as the shell of Clark Kent" (I had sent her my prologue) but as someone else, someone who stood above all that "appeals to what longs for the cage" in us.[33] No servant spirituality here. This was an American gnostic in full possession of her powers and authority. She was writing about her own "gnostic rendering in an attempt to define the supernatural abilities of those who have ventured beyond the limitations of the spaciotemporal realm confines and into a consciousness which does not predict as much as apprehend what is eternally true."

Alana was writing about herself, of course. And she was perfectly serious. She stated very clearly in her first email to me that her writing career had been a traditional academic or scholarly one until 2015, when a "mystical experience" exploded her earlier understandings and catalyzed this new direction. This particular sentence in the same email caught my eye: "There is a moment in *The Girl Who Thought She Was God* where I revisit a memory so often that I am actually transported into the mind of the 'past' self while retaining consciousness in the 'future,' and later points of contact where I can send myself signs. The significance of such events and their potential to alter consciousness on a broader scale few can comprehend."

Alana was doing exactly what Paul Loeb had argued superhumans would someday learn to do in his own work on Nietzsche's Zarathustra.[34] Little wonder she explicitly invokes or alludes to the *Übermensch* throughout the first book.[35] It was difficult for me not to see the parallels, or just identities. Alana Eisenbarth is Friedrich Nietzsche. The *Übermensch* has become the Girl Who Is God.

Admittedly, the comparison is not exact. It never is. Eisenbarth's project is not precisely Nietzsche's. As she herself recognized, her vision is more akin to the subsuming acts of Jean Grey as Phoenix in the X-Men mythology (the myth is true) or the ancient Gnostic tenet to dissolve "all material

substance in the acceptance of higher consciousness." Here is what she calls "a spiritual conflagration" of materiality itself, a kind "radical renunciation of what has been" that "leads to the transcendence of lower human capacities and the emergence of a superior race."

Alana is certainly not speaking just metaphorically in such lines. She intends to communicate an actual "burning up in the presence of God," a "divine annihilation," a cosmic "conflagration."[36] And so the first book ends: "We are over. Whatever you do will be in vain. The ones who know this and proceed will go on."[37] These, of course, are all modern translations of ancient mystical, really Gnostic and much later Nietzschean sensibilities.

Alana asks the obvious: but what kind of academic method is *that*?

A superhuman one, of course.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND THE SIGIL

I wouldn't drink a glass of beer with a Superman.

C. G. JUNG, Seminar on Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*

I got the funny epigraph from Paul Bishop's book, which he thought and wrote "in the shadow of the superman," a superhuman shape that Bishop suggests, with Nietzsche (it's his line), is produced by a light that throws a shadowy form *from the future*.[1] I have suggested much the same in these pages, of course—that we can best appreciate the humanities by seeing ourselves working with the past lights and in the present shadows of just such a superhuman future, *whether it arrives or not as we imagine*. It is that dream or vision and, just as importantly, the attitudes that such a vision will largely determine that most count, not whether such a dream comes to be according to our present understanding and values.

It will not, of course.

The present book is indebted to my colleagues and friends, who are not at all like Jung's Superman, with whom he apparently would not drink a glass of beer, but are, in my own mind at least, secret superhumans with whom I can and indeed often have drunk a glass of beer (or better). That's kind of the point of the book, actually. Drink. Talk. Challenge. Change. *It's okay*.

The simple truth is that this book is all about these living intellectuals, these professional colleagues, these *friends*. The book is the result of a long series of real-world conversations with professionally active academics from fields as diverse as the study of religion, literature, history, philosophy, anthropology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, Asian religions, neuroscience, quantum physics, evolutionary biology, New Testament criticism, Hollywood film, digital communication, and creative writing. Among these colleagues—"friendship is the ultimate method"—I would like to list here, in alphabetical order: Hussein Ali Agrama, Dale C. Allison Jr., John Allison, Harald Atmanspacher, Justine Bakker, Lisa Balabanlilar, Bill Barnard, Elias Bongmba, Josh Boone, Sravana Borkataky-Varma, Niki Kasumi Clements, Andrew Cohen, Alana Eisenbarth, Jessica Ferguson, Stephen Finley, Amitav Ghosh, Ann Gleig, Biko Gray, Wouter J. Hanegraaff,

Marsha Hewitt, Naamleela Jones, AnaLouise Keating, Ed Kelly, Anne Rose Kitagawa, Paul Loeb, Tanya Luhrmann, Glenn Magee, Paul Marshall, Benjamin Mayo, David Metcalfe, Timothy Morton, Michael Murphy, Stanislav Panin, William Parsons, Rachael Petersen, Anthony Pinn, Diane Hennacy Powell, Erin Prophet, Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, Marques Redd, Mary-Jane Rubenstein, Stefan Sanchez, Deepak Sarma, Christopher Senn, Richard Shweder, Kenneth Smith, Charles Stang, Connor Storck, Eric Wargo, and Onaje X.O. Woodbine.

Four individuals require more.

My dean, Kathleen Canning, has been a constant source of inspiration and intellectual conversation for me. I have worked with Kathleen in the Dean's Office as an associate dean for almost three years at the time of this publication. We worked straight through a deadly and terrifying pandemic. I watched Kathleen up close engage thoroughly with every challenge that confronted us as she led the transformation of our School of Humanities into a strong, if always imperfect, voice and embodiment of social justice, gender equity, and racial reconciliation. This little book has attempted, and probably has failed, to integrate the strong ethical dimension of the humanities that Kathleen models so powerfully. In any case, I could not have written this book without her moral-intellectual leadership and the university-wide, really nationwide, perspectives that the Dean's Office provided. That I was able to write this book at all is also a mark of Kathleen's grace and generosity. She understood perfectly well that Jeff cannot not write, and she morally supported and personally encouraged that most necessary part of me. Thank you, Kathleen.

Nor could I have written this book without Kyle Wagner, my new editor at the University of Chicago Press. T. David Brent, now retired, had happily guided all seven of my earlier books with the Press through development, peer review, design, and eventual publication. Kyle has now gracefully done the same with this new book. He has also put up with endless emails, queries, and manuscript drafts, often on the weekends (when my correspondence bandwidth finally and temporarily opens up from my administrative duties). Thank you, Kyle.

Finally, Jim and Christina Grote, through the Hummingbird Foundation, have been a constant source of financial support and personal grace. Their summer research grants have relieved me of other practical worries and concerns and have given me a kind of freedom that has in turn made possible the present book. Thank you, Christina. Thank you, Jim.

It was Arthur Schopenhauer who said that he had one simple idea, and then went on to write two immense tomes of some twelve hundred pages to explain this "simple idea" in terms of metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics and a lifetime of meditation (the truth was all one glorious unity for him). As if that were not enough, he also seriously asked his readers, in the preface no less, to read the gigantic first volume *twice*, and, before that, his "introduction" to the same two-volume masterpiece, which just happened to be another of his own books.

I am not Arthur Schopenhauer (one of many understated understatements), but I understand the "one simple idea" thingy perfectly well. I have only ever had one real idea, too. I have been writing about this single idea—that the humanities are really the superhumanities, that the humanist canon contains the most extraordinary things, that there is no such thing as an ordinary human being—at least since 2001, when *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom* appeared. That particular book, my second, was about the mystical experiences of scholars of mysticism and how these altered states, many of them erotic and highly conflicted in nature, generated the subsequent published scholarship and some particularly influential currents within the study of religion. That book was predictably ignored.

In truth, though, I wrote that book because I had already walked that talk and wrote my first book out of a similar series of ecstatic or mystical—and, yes, erotic—experiences that had already occurred as far back as the fall of 1989. *Kali's Child* was written, at first as a dissertation (1993) and then as a book (1995), as an intellectual and aesthetic expression of these same mystico-erotic states, which in physiological fact almost killed me (I believe now that they were correlated with a cardiac event). Unfortunately, that first book was not ignored (my last understated understatement).

My friend Jody Radzik, a graphic artist, created the magical sigil above after an image I drew on a napkin in about 2000 on our way to Big Sur. I then made this sigil, meant to conjure as much as to symbolize, the central iconic trope of *Roads*. I have used it again in these pages for a specific, if until now unspoken, reason: to signal to the reader that I have been trying to speak this truth, this single idea, since 1989—that is, for thirty-three years now. This truth or idea comes down to this: *We are not just human, and that "other half" that we do not commonly realize as such in fact makes all the difference*. You can call that simple idea remarkably consistent or numbingly repetitive. It is probably a bit of both. Still, it is my only idea (and, in truth, it is not even mine). But it's a big one.

Surely, someone owes me a glass of beer now.

NOTES

PROLOGUE

1. I do not know when I made up this parable, but I know who inspired me to make it up: Alvin Schwartz. Alvin wrote many of the Superman and Batman comic strips of the 1940s and 1950s and penned two metaphysical memoirs around Superman and Batman, both reimagined in the mirror of Tibetan Buddhism. See my *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 237–53.

2. I told this story as "The Original Superman Saves a Life," in *The Super Natural: Why the Unexplained Is Real*, Whitley Strieber and Jeffrey J. Kripal (New York: Penguin/Random House, 2017), 228–32. As I did there, I am changing minor details for the sake of privacy.

INTRODUCTION

1. See Sheldon Pollock, Benjamin A. Elman, and Ku-ming Kevin Chang, eds., *World Philology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); and Rens Bod, *A New History of the Humanities: The Search for Principles and Patterns from Antiquity to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

2. I have told the story elsewhere, but my first book emerged from an ecstatic state that displayed features of a kundalini awakening, a cardiac-inflected near-death experience, and an alien abduction. My second book was on the mystical experiences of scholars of mysticism and how the former inspired the books of the latter. My third book was on the study of religion as a potential academic gnosticism. And so on. Obviously, this is my "one idea" or "one book."

3. Because I will refer regularly to my own work, I thought it best to reference these throughout the text as SB, for my memoir-manifesto, where all the ideas are discussed and systematized. See Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Secret Body: Erotic and Esoteric Currents in the History of Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

4. I am indebted to Nietzsche scholar Paul Loeb for this insight.

5. Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 1999).

6. Mircea Eliade is a clear precursor of what I am calling the superhumanities (SB 276–79, 402–8).

7. Jason A. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

8. I am referring to Joseph of Cupertino (1603–63), a Franciscan friar that well over 150 eyewitnesses swore on oath, under the pain of damnation no less, that they saw float or fly firsthand. As a number of commentators have pointed out with delight or consternation, the historical evidence for Joseph's *voli*, or "flights," are as good as (or much better than) any number of other historical events that we take for granted. See C.M.N.

Eire, "The Good, the Bad, and the Airborne: Levitation and the History of the Impossible in Early Modern Europe," in *Ideas and Cultural Margins in Early Modern Germany: Essays in Honor of H. C. Erik Midelfort*, ed. Marjorie Elizabeth Plummer (New York: Routledge, 2009); and R. K. Rittgers, "He Flew: A Concluding Reflection on the Place of Eternity and the Supernatural in the Scholarship of Carlos M. N. Eire," in *A Linking of Heaven and Earth: Studies in Religious and Cultural History in Honor of Carlos M. N. Eire*, ed. Scott K. Taylor and Emily Michelson (New York: Routledge, 2012).

9. The phrase is from Harvard psychiatrist John Mack, another superhumanist writer who had the audacity to take alien abduction experiences of his patients seriously—that is, as subverting Western notions of reality as amenable to a scientific method that splits everything into a subject and a set of objects. Predictably, Harvard University tried to get him fired for this outrage, here under the banner of medical malpractice. See Ralph Blumenthal, *The Believer: Alien Encounters, Hard Science, and the Passions of John Mack* (Albuquerque, NM: High Road Books, 2021).

10. Richard A. Shweder, *Thinking through Cultures: Expeditions in Cultural Psychology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

11. Shweder, *Thinking through Cultures*, 38. I would make essentially the same argument much later. I think Rick is just right. See my "The Super Natural: Powers and Superpowers in the Modern World" for the Chicago Humanities Festival at https://www.chicagohumanities.org/events/super-natural-powers-and-superpowers-modern-world/.

12. Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 42.

13. Email correspondence, May 31, 2021, and June 3, 2021.

14. Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

15. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Knowledge: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon, 1971), 387. As we will see in chapter 2, he would later express regret about this most famous line.

16. For a few dozen expressions and histories of the super in the history of religions, see Jeffrey J. Kripal, ed., *Super Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 2018).

17. Paul Loeb has reminded us that "Superman" was the original and established translation of *Übermensch*, particularly in the United States, until the misguided 1954 "correction" of Walter Kaufmann as "overman" (Paul S. Loeb, "Nietzsche's Transhumanism: Evolution and Eternal Recurrence," in *Nietzsche and Transhumanism*, ed. Yunus Tuncel [Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017], 84). George Bernard Shaw used the translation in his play *Man and Superman* in 1905. H. L. Mencken called the philosopher "The Prophet of the Superman" in his *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche* in 1907. The American arts critic James Gibbons Huneker used the phrase *A Book of Supermen* in a Nietzsche-inspired subtitle in 1909 (Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and His Ideas* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012], 55, 42). Christian theologians wrote about how Christian socialist ethics, the Social Gospel, could make us all "supermen" in 1912, or sharply contrasted Christ with the "Superman of Nietzsche" in 1919 (ibid., 88, 93). And so on. In short, it was "Superman" from the very beginning of the American Nietzsche.

18. Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nietzsche's Final Teaching* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 4.

19. Tyler T. Roberts, *Contesting Spirit: Nietzsche, Affirmation, Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

20. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970).

21. I think another French acute reader of Nietzsche, the atheistic mystic Georges Bataille, was much closer to Nietzsche's actual vision. Predictably, Bataille and his atheistic mystical theology have mostly been ignored in the broader academy.

22. See especially Benedetta Zavatta, *Individuality and Beyond: Nietzsche Reads Emerson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). I will discuss and source the transparent eye-ball passage later, in chapter 1.

23. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1992). 352–60, 359.

24. Consider the early feminist thinker Emma Goldman (incarcerated in 1917 and deported to Russia for her fierce thought) and the Black intellectual Hubert Harrison on African American Christianity as a glorification of "subjugation and subservience" in Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche*, 178–79 and 180, respectively.

25. Ibid., 258.

26. Quoted in ibid., 259.

27. Quoted in ibid., 258.

28. Ibid., 259.

29. See Paul S. Loeb and Matthew Meyer, *Nietzsche's Metaphilosophy: The Nature, Method, and Aims of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

30. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unpublished Fragments from the Period of* Thus Spoke Zarathustra (*Summer 1882–Winter 1883/84*), trans. Paul S. Loeb and David F. Tinsley, vol. 14 of *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Alan D. Schrift and Duncan Large (Menlo Park, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 387.

31. Ibid., 394.

32. I have been especially inspired here by Ann Gleig in correspondence, in her public lectures, and in her published work; for example, *American Dharma: Buddhism beyond Modernity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

33. Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche*, 187.

CHAPTER ONE

1. Jeffrey J. Kripal, "Humanism and Higher Education," in *Oxford Handbook of Humanism*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

2. Martin Riesebrodt, *The Promise of Religion: A Theory of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), xiii, 6.

3. Martin Riesebrodt, *Cultus und Heilsversprechen: Eine Theorie den Religionen* (Munich: Beck, 2007).

4. Max Weber, "The Nature of Charismatic Authority and Its Routinization," in *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A.M. Anderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: Free Press, 1947), 358–59. My thanks to Jules Evans for this passage.

5. Riesebrodt, *The Promise*, 75.

6. Ibid., 18.

7. Dale C. Allison Jr., *The Resurrection of Jesus: Apologetics, Criticism, History* (New York:

Bloomsbury, 2021), 365. The phrase "within the limits of reason alone" is a coded criticism of Immanuel Kant and the rational tradition as a whole.

8. The most comprehensive comparative study here is David Weddle, *Miracles: Wonder and Meaning in World Religions* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

9. See especially Chris Gosden, *Magic: A History: From Alchemy to Witchcraft, from the Ice Age to the Present* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

10. See Robert McLuhan, *Randi's Prize: What Sceptics Say about the Paranormal, Why They Are Wrong, and Why It Matters* (Surrey, UK: White Crow Books, 2019); and Mitch Horowitz, "The Man Who Destroyed Skepticism," *Boing*, October 26, 2020, https://boingboing.net/author/mhorowitz.

11. I am thinking of the remote viewing or psychic espionage programs of the United States and Soviet Union through much of the Cold War, each, of course, spying on the other as the enemy. And this is before we get to the UFO research programs of numerous contemporary nation-states that were, and still are, carried on behind endless security walls, as if these spectral-physical presences in the sky are somehow threats. More Cold War mythology.

12. V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), xi.

13. Ibid., 186.

14. Ibid., ix, 186, 199–200. Significantly, the phrase "absolute discourse" occurs in the penultimate sentence of the book.

15. Pierre-Philippe Fraiture, trans. and ed., *V. Y. Mudimbe: Undisciplined Africanism* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 48.

16. Jan Assmann, *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 7.

17. Consider Charlie Huenemann's appraisal: "But unlike Nietzsche, Spinoza found something divine at the heart of nature. . . . Clearly, the divine substance is not a person, has no providence or plans, does not judge people or actions as good or evil, and will not hear any prayers or songs. And yet Spinoza calls it 'God.' . . . When Spinoza demonstrates that the mind's intellectual love of God is the same love with which God loves himself, Spinoza is not playing with words. He is describing an intellectual union with a divine being more profound and enriching than Moses's experience, whatever it was, on the mountain." See Charlie Huenemann, *Spinoza's Radical Theology: The Metaphysics of the Infinite* (Durham, UK: Acumen, 2014), 138–39.

18. Matthew Stewart, *The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 14.

19. Assmann, *Of God and Gods*, 8.

20. Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 142.

21. I am relying here on different cited sources, including the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on Ficino, available at https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ficino/.

22. Brian P. Copenhaver, *Hermetica, The Greek* Corpus Hermeticum *and the Latin* Asclepius *in a New English Translation with Notes and Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), xlviii.

23. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality and the Historical Imagination: Altered States of Knowledge in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), ch. 3.

(Page numbers were not yet available at the time of this writing, so I am citing by chapter numbers.)

24. Ibid., ch. 8.

25. Ibid., chs. 1 and 2.

26. April D. DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion from Antiquity to Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 12.

27. Hanegraaff quoting Zosimos in Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality*, ch. 4.

28. Hanegraaff writes of the "illusion of alterity" in *Hermetic Spirituality*, ch. 8, thus echoing Nisargadatta as discussed below. In such a nondualism, *there is no other*.

29. Ibid., ch. 8. Bucke did not coin the phrase. The phrase was used in *From Adam's Peak to Elephanta* (1892) by the British mystic, homosexual activist, and socialist Edward Carpenter, who was drawing on his own mystical illumination and the countless Hindu formulations and experiences of similar states among the *gnani* or gnostics, of India. He understood the expression as an English translation of the Sanskrit *sat-chit-ananda*, or "being-consciousness-bliss," a classic formulation for the true nature of reality in Hindu nondualism. Bucke, who met Carpenter in 1891, appears to have borrowed and used it again as his title phrase in his *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study of the Evolution of the Human Mind* (1901). See Mark Ryan, *A Different Dimension: Reflections on the History of Transpersonal Thought* (Washington, DC: Westphalia, 2018), 20–29.

30. Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality*, ch. 3. Hanegraaff knows of what he is writing. It was Hanegraaff, after all, who wrote what is easily one of the most complete and most nuanced studies of New Age spiritualities: *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

31. Quoted in Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality*, ch. 3.

32. Ibid., ch. 9. See also Charles M. Stang, *Our Divine Double* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

33. Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality*, ch. 7.

34. Ibid., ch. 7.

35. *Corpus Hermeticum*, ch. 11, verses 18 and 20, quoted and translated in ibid., ch. 7.

36. Ibid., ch. 3.

37. Ibid., ch. 1.

38. Ibid., ch. 1.

39. Ibid., ch. 9.

40. Ibid., ch. 1.

41. Ibid., ch. 2. See Ioan P. Coulianu, *Out of This World: Otherworldly Journeys from Gilgamesh to Albert Einstein* (Boulder, CO: Shambalah, 2001). Significantly, UFOs are often spherical and take on explicit spiritual dimensions. Dead loved ones, *souls*, even appear in some contact experiences.

42. Hanegraaff, *Hermetic Spirituality*, ch. 4, quoting Iamblichus, and ch. 7.

43. Ibid., ch. 2.

44. Ibid.

45. Paul Monaghan, "Theatre and Philosophy: The Lies in Plato's Closet," *Double Dialogues*, no. 8 (Summer 2007), https://www.doubledialogues.com/article/theatre-and-philosophy-the-lies-in-platos-closet/.

46. Allami, Abu'l Fazl, *A'in (Ayn)-i Akbari*, chap. 43, vol. 3, 345–48, ed. Sir Jadunath Sarkar (New Delhi: Munshiran Manoharlal, 1977, 3rd ed.). My deepest thanks to Lisa Balabanlilar for finding this needle reference in a very large textual haystack.

47. A. Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 131.

48. See especially William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-ʿArabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

49. See ibid. and Chittick, *Science of the Cosmos, Science of the Soul: The Pertinence of Islamic Cosmology in the Modern World* (London: Oneworld, 2007).

50. Quoted in Stephen Cross, *Schopenhauer's Encounter with Indian Thought:* Representation *and* Will *and Their Indian Parallels* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013), 30.

51. Ibid., 10.

52. Robert Ford Campany, *Making Transcendents: Ascetics and Social Memory in Early Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2016), xiii–xviii.

53. Douglas Osto, *Altered States: Buddhism and Psychedelic Spirituality in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 234–35.

54. See David V. Fiordalis, "Miracles in Indian Buddhist Narratives and Doctrine," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 33, no. 1–2 (2011): 384.

55. See ibid. Fiordalis has also contributed an essay to a volume that should be standard reading on this topic: Knut Axel Jacobsen, ed., *Yoga Powers: Extraordinary Capacities Attained through Meditation and Concentration* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

56. Nicholas F. Gier, *Spiritual Titanism: Indian, Chinese, and Western Perspectives* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 2–3.

57. Jason Ā. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 4.

58. Ibid., 3.

59. Ibid., 1–3. For the fuller story in another related cultural context, see Richard Noakes, *Physics and Psychics: The Occult and the Sciences in Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

60. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*, 6.

61. I am relying here on Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and His Ideas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 285. She is quoting Richard Rorty quoting W. B. Yeats.

62. Quoted in ibid., 284, 285.

63. See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); and Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2017).

64. Ralph Waldon Emerson, *Nature and Other Essays* (Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith, 2019), 5.

65. Sara Ahbel-Rappe, *Socratic Ignorance and Platonic Knowledge in the Dialogues of Plato* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018).

66. Gregory Shaw, "Theurgy and the Platonist's Luminous Body," in April D. DeConick, Gregory Shaw, and John D. Turner, eds., *Practicing Gnosis: Ritual, Magic, Theurgy and Liturgy in Nag Hammdi, Manichaean and Other Ancient Literature: Essays in Honor of Birger A. Pearson* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 537.

67. Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007); Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (New York: HarperOne, 2005).

68. Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche*, 18.

69. Josephson-Storm argues that this third realm is best figured as "magic" but is policed and disciplined as "superstition" or "pseudo-science." Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*, 15. This same *tertium quid*, or "third thing," beyond religion and science is what I have tried to express through my own specific invocations of the gnostic, the paranormal, the Super Story, and the super natural (SB 121–24, 239–41, 271–79, 315–16).

70. John E. Mack, *Passport to the Cosmos: Human Transformation and Alien Encounters* (Largo, FL: Kunati, 1999). Mack was playing off Jacques Vallee's magisterial *Passport to Magonia: From Folklore to Flying Saucers* (1969).

71. William James, "Review of *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, by Frederic W. H. Myers (1903)," in William James, *Essays in Psychical Research* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 206–7.

72. Again, Jason Josephson-Storm describes how sociology, anthropology, queer studies, and especially "reflexive religious studies" all change or produce that which they are studying. These are "entangled formations" (*The Myth*, 11–13). In more radical Nietzschean terms, this fifth feature of the superhumanities constitutes a kind of circular will to power, a self that creates itself, even a willing-back into history, one's own and that of others, in order to change the meaning of those histories and so "redeem" past selves.

73. Donald Hoffman, *The Case Against Reality: Why Evolution Hid the Truth from Our Eyes* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019).

74. The definitive study here is Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

75. Glenn Alexander Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 9–10.

76. Ibid., 38

77. Quoted in ibid., 39.

78. See, as a recent model of such philosophical pluralism, Deepak Sarma, *Classical Indian Philosophy: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

79. David Peter Lawrence, *The Teachings of the Odd-Eyed One: A Study and Translation of the Virupaksapancasika with the Commentary of Vidyacakravartin* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 40.

80. Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

81. Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, *I Am That*, trans. Maurice Frydman, ed. Sudhakar S. Diskhit (Durham, NC: Acorn, 2009), 327.

82. Ibid., 421.

83. Ibid., 433.

84. Ibid., 288–89, 301–2.

85. Nisargadatta, *I Am That*, 341–42.

86. Ibid., 284–85. The guru alternates between the "I am" as social ego, as in this passage, and the "I am" as the immortal Self. But, if I read him correctly, neither are really ultimate, because both are produced by a deeper infinite Ground of Being.

87. Ibid., 455, 494. We are also not matter or energy. Ibid., 288.

88. Ibid., 502.

89. Ibid., 316.

90. Ibid., 494–97.

CHAPTER TWO

1. Albert Camus, *Christian Metaphysics and Neoplatonism*, trans. and with an introduction by Ronald D. Srigley, epilogue by Rémi Brague (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2015).

2. Lautaro Roig Lanzillota, "Albert Camus, Metaphysical Revolt, and Modern Cinema," *Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies* 5 (2020): 45–70.

3. Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 25.

4. Quoted in preface to Camus, *Christian Metaphysics*, xiii.

5. Jacques Derrida, "Telepathy," trans. Nicholas Royle, *Oxford Literary Review* 10, no. 1–2 (1988): 3–41 (originally published in 1981). For just how deep this particular rabbit hole goes, see Nicholas Royle, *Telepathy and Literature: Essays on the Reading Mind* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2000). Royle, nearly alone as far as I can tell, *does* follow up.

6. Simeon Wade, *Foucault in California:* [*Wherein the Great French Philosopher Drops Acid in the Valley of Death*] (Berkeley, CA: Heyday, 2019).

7. Peter O'Leary, *Gnostic Contagion: Robert Duncan and the Poetry of Illness* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002).

8. Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 17.

9. Rita Felski, *Literature after Feminism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

10. Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 2019), 41.

11. Felski, *The Limits*, 150.

12. I have explored at some length a third iconic superhumanist, Aldous Huxley, his (really) brave new world, and how we made his ecstatic-psychedelic vision depressing again in SB 212–27.

13. I rely here on Paul S. Loeb and his astonishing *The Death of Nietzsche's Zarathustra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

14. This was not always so. Earlier American interpreters sought "to balance the deconstructive with the regenerative" and pursued a "gay science" that "balanced analytic vivisection with aesthetic creation." Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and His Ideas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 151.

15. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unpublished Fragments from the Period of* Thus Spoke Zarathustra (*Summer 1882–Winter 1883/84*), trans. Paul S. Loeb and David F. Tinsley, vol. 14 of *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Alan D. Schrift and Duncan Large (Menlo Park, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 189, 271.

16. Ibid., 347; and Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans., ed., and with commentaries by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 787.

17. Nietzsche, *Unpublished Fragments,* 201.

18. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, introduced by Kathleen M. Higgins and Robert C. Solomon, trans. Clancy Martin (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2005), 54.

19. Nietzsche, *Unpublished Fragments,* 453; see also 493.

20. Much of Nietzsche's reception history has occurred well outside the academy, in esoteric movements and popular culture, where it has been much more positive and effective. Graham Parkes, for example, rejects "Superman" for a translation, because it "conjures up unfortunate associations with musclebound blue-suited heroes." Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra, A New Translation by Graham Parkes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), xviii. I respectfully disagree, because this is the same reason why

I think "Superman" *is* such a solid and long-lasting English translation. The (Jewish) guy in blue tights and a cape counts, *a lot*.

21. Michael Allen Gillespie summarizes the latest best guess: "Perhaps the most convincing [diagnosis] is the suspicion that Nietzsche suffered from a slowly growing right-sided retro-orbital meningioma, which would not only explain his break and subsequent decline, but also his long-standing migraines and right-eye blindness." *Nietzsche's Final Teaching* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 181.

22. The German *Geist* can mean "spirit," "mind," or "intellect." Nietzsche's constant use of the adjectival form (*geistig*) to describe himself certainly does not mean "spiritual" in the contemporary American sense, but it also definitively carries *way* more than the English "intellectual." We do not really have an adequate translation for it. Significantly, the noun is also one of the base words of the German compound for the "humanities," the *Geisteswissenschaften*, literally the "sciences of the spirit."

23. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, translation and commentary by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 223.

24. Alfred Russel Wallace, *On Miracles and Modern Spiritualism: Three Essays* (London: James Burns, 1875), 16.

25. Charles H. Smith, "Wallace, Spiritualism, and Beyond: 'Change,' or 'No Change'?" in *Natural Selection and Beyond: The Intellectual Legacy of Alfred Russel Wallace*, ed. Charles H. Smith and George Beccalonis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 420.

26. Paul S. Loeb and David F. Tinsley and Loeb, "Translators' Afterword," in Nietzsche, *Unpublished Fragments*, 758.

27. Ibid., 786.

28. Ibid., 775.

29. Ibid., 778, 794.

30. Ibid., 135.

31. Ibid., 105.

32. Ibid., 150; cf. 196, 198.

33. Kaufman, 662. The original passage is at Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 717.

34. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), 212.

35. Ibid., 381.

36. Nietzsche, *Unpublished Fragments*, 142.

37. Loeb and Tinsley, "Afterword," 750.

38. *Faust*, part 1, line 490. For a discussion and the German, see Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche*, 110.

39. Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche*, 111.

40. I will contextualize and source this idealist gnomon in our next chapter.

41. Nietzsche, *Unpublished Fragments*, 94.

42. Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche*, 45, 47. The former appeared in the 1900 obituary for Nietzsche in the *New York Times Saturday Review*. The latter is from the British sexologist Havelock Ellis in 1903.

43. Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche*, 53.

44. Nietzsche, *Unpublished Fragments*, 538, 308, 326 (compare 381), 490, 389, 44, 250.

45. Ibid., 573, 434, 563, 21, 22.

46. "The most scientific" line is noted in Arthur C. Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher*

(New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 52, where it appears, without reference, as "the most scientific of hypotheses." Nietzsche would link truth and science until the end. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 728.

47. Ibid., 751.

48. The rock is featured in Claude Lalonde's *Coda* (2019), starring Patrick Stewart and Katie Holmes. It appears throughout the film but is finally fully seen at the end, where the Patrick Stewart character communes with the rock by touching it. The film tones down Nietzsche's teaching of "eternal recurrence," turning it into a moral metaphor for accepting life as it is—a typical (depressing) move perfected by humanist scholars for over a century before the film appeared.

49. Nietzsche, *Unpublished Fragments*, 525. I will pursue this in a later work (which I signal or foreshadow in the conclusion to this book), but I read the Nietzschean "being overcome" in sexual or biological, not violent, terms. It is through procreation, after all, that we are definitively and truly overcome. The present passage makes that very clear in its language of "fathers of the superhumans," even if the language is still coded.

50. In fact, Nietzsche used different German expressions for this central teaching: *Wiederkehr*, *Wiederkunft*, and *Wiederholung*, generally translated as "return," "recurrence," and "repetition," respectively. Loeb argues that they are interchangeable and clearly imply numerical difference or, as Nietzsche put it, "once more and innumerable times more" (*noch einmal und noch unzählige Male*) (Loeb, *The Death*, 1n1, 17).

51. Contrary to Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and the whole anti-metaphysical agenda of postmodernism, Nietzsche was not anti-metaphysical, at least if one defines metaphysics in broad terms as the philosophy of the real. What he *was* writing against were dualistic or theistic metaphysical systems that located truth or ultimacy, and so human destiny, outside the natural world or cosmos in some ideal illusion or fiction that deprives reality of "its value, its meaning, its truthfulness" (*Ecce Homo*, 674). What Nietzsche was advancing was an "*immanent* metaphysics" (Loeb, "Nietzsche's Transhumanism," 88).

52. Loeb, *The Death*, 55–56, 58n35.

53. Loeb, "Nietzsche's Transhumanism," 88.

54. Quoted in Loeb, *The Death*, 12, 73.

55. Ibid., 161.

56. Nietzsche, *Unpublished Fragments*, 121.

57. Loeb, *The Death*, 26.

58. Nietzsche, *Unpublished Fragments*, 531.

59. Ibid., 182.

60. Paul S. Loeb, "The Rebirth of Nietzsche's Zarathustra," *The Agonist: A Nietzsche Circle Journal* 8, nos. 1 and 2 (Fall 2014–Spring 2015): 15–16, http://agonist.nietzschecircle.com/wp/agonist__archive-2/.

61. Loeb, *The Death*, 175.

62. Nietzsche, *Unpublished Fragments*, 522; quoted and discussed in Loeb, *The Death*, 182.

63. Nietzsche, *Unpublished Fragments*, 476.

64. Ibid., 470.

65. Loeb, *The Death*, 179. The implications here for writing and revisioning history are *vast*.

66. See ibid., 201; see also 187.

67. Nietzsche, *Unpublished Fragments*, 387.

68. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 717.

69. William James to Karl Knortz, June 21, 1888, quoted and discussed in Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche*, 19.

70. Eugene Taylor, *William James on Consciousness beyond the Margin* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3. My thanks to Connor Storck for this reference and for much that follows on James and the "anaesthetic revelation." See Connor J. Storck, "Psychedelics and Religious Insight: A Precedent in American Psycho-Spirituality from William James to Timothy Leary" (master's thesis, Rice University, 2021).

71. William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 299, 330.

72. James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 44–45.

73. William James, "Frederic Myers's Service to Psychology," in *Essays in Psychical Research* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 193, 201.

74. See Deborah Blum, *Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life after Death* (New York: Penguin, 2007).

75. For a discussion of this friendship, see especially G. William Barnard, *Exploring Unseen Worlds: William James and the Philosophy of Mysticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 31–32.

76. William James, review of *The Anesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy*, by Benjamin Blood, 627–28.

77. William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy, Human Immortality, Both Books Bound as One* (New York: Dover, 2019), 294.

78. Ibid., 295.

79. Ibid., 296.

80. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: The Modern Library, 1936), 401.

81. James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 325.

82. Willim James, unpublished note, quoted in Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche*, 109.

83. James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, 170–71.

84. Ibid., 310.

85. Ibid., 134.

86. Ibid., 153.

87. Ibid., 174.

88. Ibid., 292.

89. Ibid., 293; see also 310, 311.

90. Ibid., 205.

91. Ibid., 315.

92. Ibid., 295, 298, 299, 309.

93. Ibid., 330.

94. Ibid., 309.

95. For a fuller discussion of this striking thesis about the culturally conditioned nature of nature, see my essay, "Returning the Human Sciences to Consciousness: Bertrand Méheust and the Sociology of the Impossible," in *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

96. Richard A. Shweder, *Thinking through Cultures: Explorations in Cultural Psychology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 35.

97. Ibid., 39. My mystical reading of Nietzsche above is different from Shweder's anti-

metaphysical one, but that is not relevant here. Shweder's reading of Nietzsche is in fact the accepted academic one, which is what is important in this context.

98. Ibid., 38.

99. Ibid. 39.

100. Ibid., 38.

101. Richard A. Shweder, "Let Me Tell You a Story about Hindu Temples and Runaway Trolleys," in *Psychoanalysis, Culture, and Religion: Essays in Honour of Sudhir Kakar*, ed. Dinesh Sharma (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 271. The dictum originally appeared as an epigram to Richard A. Shweder, *Why Men Barbecue: Recipes for Cultural Psychology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

102. See Richard A. Shweder, "Relativism and Universalism," in *A Companion to Moral Anthropology*, ed. Didier Fassin (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 97, 94.

103. Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), 116–17; see also Shweder, "Relativism and Universalism," 98–99.

104. Let me put that in academic-speak: there is absolutely no contradiction between affirming Said's famous anti-Orientalist or postcolonial critique and affirming the truth of Orientalism. The Light of wisdom really and truly comes "from the East" (*ex oriente lux*) from the European perspective, and, yes, of course, this same truth was subsequently linked to all sorts of bad political and colonial purposes. This is how we made the truth depressing once again.

105. T. M. Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

CHAPTER THREE

1. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 511. What I have called, following the Dutch historian of early Christian Gnosticism Gilles Quispel (1916–2006), faith, reason, and gnosis are three ways of knowing that line up nicely with Taylor's own tripartite schema. See Jeffrey J. Kripal, *The Serpent's Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

2. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 502–3.

3. Ibid., 510.

4. Ibid., 513.

5. Ibid., 521.

6. The passage appears at John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Viking, 2014), 442. For a film version of the speech, see https://paulgreer.net/2017/11/28/ill-be-there-the-final-speech-of-tom-joad/.

7. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 1, trans. and ed. by Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman, and Christopher Janaway, introduced by Christopher Janaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 26.

8. Ibid., 24.

9. See, for example, ibid., 576, n. 55.

10. Arthur Schopenhauer, "Essay on Spirit Seeing and Everything Connected Therewith," in *Parerga and Paralipomena: Some Philosophical Essays*, vol. 1, trans. E.F.J. Payne (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 176, 579.

11. Here is another example of my introductory claim that the new order of knowl-

edge signaled by the superhumanities joins or fuses the empirical (*Wahr-*) and the imaginal (*träumen*).

12. Schopenhauer, "Essay on Spirit Seeing," 267.

13. Ibid., 229.

14. Schopenhauer, *The World*, 380.

15. Ibid., 56.

16. Ibid., 221. Here is the original source of the "one eye of the world" gnomon signaled above in chapter 2.

17. Bernardo Kastrup, *Decoding Schopenhauer's Metaphysics: The Key to Understanding How It Solves the Hard Problem of Consciousness and the Paradoxes of Quantum Mechanics* (Winchester, UK: IFF Books, 2020), 18. Kastrup is referencing the English translation of E. F. J. Payne, Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. II (New York: Dover. 1969), 196. My sincerest thanks to Kastrup for his precise citations and personal help here and for his constant modeling of analytic idealism for us all.

18. Schopenhauer, *The World*, 417.

19. Ibid., 212.

20. Ibid., 380–84. Schopenhauer's "Vedanta philosophy" is the Advaita Vedanta or nondual school of Indian philosophy. We should be careful here. Schopenhauer points out that his thought can find "a corollary" in the Upanishads and Indian philosophy but "cannot be found there." Schopenhauer, *The World*, 9. In fact, Schopenhauer's philosophical system of metaphysics, aesthetics, and ethics is close to but finally other, and often much more negative, than the fantastic superhuman visions of the Hindu and Buddhist traditions of Asia, as discussed in chapter 1.

21. See Jeffrey J. Kripal, "Can Superhero Comics Really Transmit Esoteric Knowledge?" in *Hermes Explains: Thirty-One Questions about Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter Hanegraaff, Peter Forshaw, and Marco Pasi (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019). The question is rhetorical. The answer is "Yes, they can, and they do."

22. Mauricio Oviedo Salazar, "One with the Universe: The Construction of Doctor Strange's Magic in 1973," *Journal of Religious and Popular Culture* 32, no. 3 (Fall 2020).

23. Quoted in ibid., 167. The original is also in all caps (of course it is), which I have removed for the sake of readability. Just couldn't do that.

24. Mehdi Amin Razavi, *Suhrawardi and the School of Illumination* (Surrey, UK: Curzon, 1997), 52–53.

25. Ibid., 47.

26. A recent example is the American spiritual teacher Andrew Cohen, who reached out for advice after his spiritual community collapsed, largely because of his authoritarian behavior. I consider Cohen to be the real deal. I am also sure the community (some of whose former members I know) collapsed for all sorts of perfectly good reasons. That double insistence is the healing secret. See Andrew Cohen, with Hans Plasqui, *Radical Spirit: The Challenging Transformation of a Modern Guru* (forthcoming).

27. Elizabeth G. Krohn and Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Changed in a Flash: One Woman's Near-Death Experiences and Why a Scholar Thinks It Empowers Us All* (Berkeley. CA: North Atlantic Books, 2018).

28. Schopenhauer, *The World*, 245, 361, 367, 380–84.

29. Quoted and discussed in Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 151.

30. Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the*

East, 1680–1880, trans. Gene Paterson-Black and Victor Reinking (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), xv, xix, xvii. Later major works along similar balanced lines include Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); Urs App, *The Birth of Orientalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); and Mark Sedgwick, *Western Sufism: From the Abbasids to the New Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

31. See Jeffrey J. Kripal, *The Serpent's Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 175–77.

32. Quoted in Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche*, 274.

33. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1994), 418.

34. Harold Bloom, *Omens of the Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 16, 23.

35. Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and His Ideas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 275.

36. Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 489.

37. Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche*, 276. The Bloom quote is on the same page.

38. Bloom, *Omens of the Millennium*, 23.

39. Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche*, 275.

40. See Naomi Wolf, "The Silent Treatment," *New York*, February 20, 2004, https://nymag.com/nymetro/news/features/n__9932/. In fairness, it should be observed that Bloom denied the charges before he passed.

41. See, for example, Ed Fernyhough, "Should Michel Foucault Be Cancelled? Serious Allegations Have Surfaced about the French Philosopher," *Medium*, April 2, 2021, https://medium.com/politically-speaking/thinking-through-the-serious-allegations-against-michel-foucault-275e0e84f896.

42. James Miller and Andrés Gómez Bravo, "Why We Shouldn't Cancel Foucault: Even If He Had Sex with Underage Boys in a Tunisian Cemetery in the Sixties," *Public Seminar*, April 8, 2021, https://publicseminar.org/essays/why-we-shouldnt-cancel-foucault/. For the full bio, see James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

43. Foucault was hardly alone among French intellectuals in the late 1970s taking such a public position. Others included Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Roland Barthes. The story is told in more detail in Mitchell Dean and Daniel Zamora, *The Last Man Takes LSD: Foucault and the End of Revolution* (London: Verso, 2021), 64–65.

44. I am relying on the introduction to Dean and Zamora, *The Last Man*, 7. It should be added that this book is largely about Foucault's late neoliberalism and rejection of the overgoverning of the welfare state. Accordingly, the authors do not, in the end, read the psychedelic trip in ecstatic or entirely positive terms. I suspect that these two authors would read the whitened block in the photographic image of the desert on the cover of the book (no doubt, meant to symbolize the philosopher's Truth experience) suspiciously, as a political and economic escape or failure of nerve, whereas I read it as a missed opportunity to transcend the social and its normative discourses altogether. Still the white block remains. Covers are important. Art is important.

45. Ibid., 10.

46. Simeon Wade, *Foucault in California: [A True Story—Wherein the Great French Philosopher Drops Acid in the Valley of Death]* (Berkeley, CA: Heyday, 2019), 8.

47. Ibid., 7.

48. Ibid., 11–12.

49. Dean and Zamora, *The Last Man*, 2–3. Some of the letters are reproduced in the book.

50. Wade, *Foucault in California*, vii.

51. Ibid., 60, 61–62, 91.

52. Ibid., 58–59.

53. Ibid., 61.

54. Ibid., 9.

55. Ibid., 38. Dean and Zamora's entire book is about how Foucault came to passionately reject the very idea of revolution as totalitarian, socialist, racist, and potentially murderous. In Marxism, Foucault found "the root of the Gulag." Dean and Zamora, *The Last Man*, 49.

56. Dean and Zamora, *The Last Man*, 5. For Foucault's rejection of his earlier writing on the face of man being washed away as "too pessimistic" and simply not believing that any longer, see Wade, *Foucault in California*, 86–87.

57. Wade, *Foucault in California*, 129.

58. Ibid., 5. This is itself a profoundly Nietzschean or "genealogical" conviction.

59. For an intellectual framing of the problem, see Jeffrey J. Kripal, "'Comparison Gets You Nowhere!': The Comparative Study of Religion and the Spiritual but Not Religious," in *Being Spiritual but Not Religious: Past, Present, Future(s)*, ed. William B. Parsons (New York: Routledge, 2020).

60. For the latest on this passage and the controversy it has occasioned through another "secret gospel" fragment, see Geoffrey S. Smith and Brent C. Landau, *The Secret Gospel of Mark: A Controversial Scholar, a Scandalous Gospel of Jesus, and the Fierce Debate over Its Authenticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022).

61. Quoted, translated, and discussed in Heather Webb, *Dante's Persons: An Ethics of the Transhuman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 7, n. 28.

62. M. V. Lodyzhenskii, *Light Invisible: Satisfying the Thirst for Happiness* (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity, 2011), 11. My thanks to my PhD student Stanislav Panin for help with the Russian.

63. Valentine Zander, *St. Seraphim of Sarov* (Crestwood, NJ: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1975), 91. I am drawing here, including for this source, on Dale C. Allison Jr., *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2009), 73.

64. I am relying here on Robert Bartlett, *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

65. The same is true, by the way, of modern words such as *telepathy*, *psychical*, *supernormal*, and *paranormal*—all of them were first coined and employed by academics and scientists.

66. Bartlett, *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 15–16.

67. Herbert Thurston, S.J., *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism* (London: Burns Oats, 1952), 1.

68. Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (New York: HarperCollins, 1981).

69. See Graham H. Twelftree, *Paul and the Miraculous: A Historical Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 8.

70. Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011). For uses of "paranormal" and "superhuman," see ibid., 2–3 and 38.

71. Ibid., 7.

72. Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 158. This is the first volume of McGinn's definitive masterwork, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, which now comprises seven volumes.

73. John D. Jones, *Pseudo-Areopagite: The Divine Names and Mystical Theology: Translated from the Greek with an Introductory Study* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), 3, 211.

74. McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, 171.

75. Charles M. Stang, *Apophasis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite: "No Longer I"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4; and *Our Divine Double* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016). Stang is following previous authors like Bernard McGinn with his key phrase "apophatic anthropology," which I have in turn adopted here.

76. McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, 167

77. Quoted in ibid., 167.

78. The same is true in many Asian cultures, where things like teeth and buried bodies focus pilgrimage centers of all kinds, particularly in Buddhist and Islamic Sufi traditions.

79. Bartlett, *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 6.

80. The Latin phrase *supra naturam* (above nature) was much older, common from the fourth century on, but it would not become a single significant coinage until the middle of the thirteenth century. Ibid., 12.

81. Ibid., 86. The sexual dimensions are endless. See ibid., 90, for a sexually loaded (and violent) scene involving night-flying witches and a sleeping naked inquisitor Dominican, who lures the woman who tells her this empirical story into a locked church room in order to beat her with a crucifix for confusing her dreams with reality (despite the fact he had just asked her how they got into his locked room to see him sleeping naked).

82. See Thurston, *Physical Phenomena*, 187–91, 353, 294, and especially Thurston's substantive study of Mollie Fancher in chapter 13, a nineteenth-century American Protestant woman who had absolutely no sympathy for Spiritualism or Catholicism but nevertheless talked to the dead and manifested all manner of physical-mystical phenomena, including a seeming fire at the top of her head accompanied by a great influx of light, reading with her fingers, precognition, clairvoyance, seeing behind her head, and a "great trance" of nine years.

83. "I have twice seen her on fire inside her clothes, ascertaining afterwards that there were real burns in her flesh similar to those caused by a boiling liquid." Ibid., 79.

84. Ibid., 294.

85. Ibid., 340.

86. Ibid., 226.

87. Bartlett, *The Natural and the Supernatural*, 15.

88. I am indebted to this particular reading of Francis to my friend and colleague Diana Walsh Pasulka.

89. Heather Webb, *Dante's Persons: An Ethics of the Transhuman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

90. Many of the papers later appeared in Ann Taves and Courtney Bender, eds., *What Matters? Ethnographies of Value in a (Not So) Secular Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

91. See T. M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012); and *How God Becomes Real: Kindling Presence of Invisible Others* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

92. T. M. Luhrmann, "When Things Happen That You Can't Explain," *New York Times*, March 5, 2015.

93. Thomas Fabisiak, *The "Nocturnal Side of Science" in David Friedrich Strauss's* Life of Jesus Critically Examined (Atlanta: SBL, 2015).

94. Fabisiak, *The "Nocturnal Side of Science,"* 22, 20. One classic text behind this discussion is Catherine Crowe's best-selling *The Night Side of Nature: Or Ghosts and Ghost Seers* (London: George Routledge, 1847), written so its readers might believe "that much which they had been taught to reject as fable, has been, in reality, ill-understood truth." Ibid., 5.

95. Quoted in Peter C. Hodgson, editor's introduction to David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (Ramsey, NJ: Sigler, 1994), xlv.

96. See especially Dale C. Allison Jr., *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2013); and *Jesus of Nazareth: Millennarian Prophet* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991).

97. Both lines of thought are evident in Allison, *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus*. Such expressions are the exact reverses of most scholarship, which sees the historical Jesus as the actual human and the theological Christ as a later imaginative construction. Allison's title is also a playful flip of an earlier liberal work of scholarship, J. Estlin Carpenter, *The Historical Jesus and the Theological Christ* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1912).

98. Allison, *The Historical Christ*, 5, 8.

99. Dale C. Allison Jr., "Resurrecting Jesus," in *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and Its Interpreters* (London: T & T Clark, 2005).

100. The category of transphysicality is from the New Testament critic N.T. Wright, which Allison uses and nuances in his comparative study of modern bodily apparitions of the dead as potent parallels to the resurrection accounts. See Dale C. Allison Jr., *The Resurrection of Jesus: Apologetics, Criticism, History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 229–30. I consider the transphysical to be another framing of the empirical-imaginal, although I recognize this may not reflect the intentions of Wright.

101. Dale C. Allison Jr., "The Paranormal Jesus," in *Super Religion*, ed. Jeffrey J. Kripal (New York: Macmillan, 2016).

102. Allison, *The Resurrection of Jesus*.

103. Others have seen the same obvious parallels, none more so than Francis V. Tiso, *Rainbow Body and Resurrection: Spiritual Attainment, the Dissolution of the Material Body, and the Case of Khenpo A Chö* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2016).

104. For "The Honey Jar," see Whitley Strieber and Jeffrey J. Kripal, *The Super Natural: Why the Unexplained Is Real* (New York: Penguin/Random, 2016), 199–201.

105. John Allison, "Why Study Religion? On My Cabinet of Unfiled Things" (unpub-

lished paper). For the parapsychologically uninitiated, a psychometric reading involves touching or holding an object and picking up otherwise unavailable information about the object's owner. I think such phenomena bear on the subject of relics (including those involving body parts), but that is another story—more superhumanities uncovering actual empirical experience behind an apparently exotic or seemingly irrational practice.

106. The *mysterium fascinosum* (alluring mystery) is a learned allusion to the German historian of religions Rudolf Otto, who used such Latin expressions to capture the felt sense of the sacred or holy. The invocation of a famous comparativist fits Allison's insistence that this originating experience was the source of all his later, and very different, religious interests, which, of course, would require the event to *not* be defined or captured by any particular religious tradition, to be beyond, before, or above them all—in my own superhumanist terms, another transcendent logic of comparison.

107. These four long block quotes are taken from an unpublished book manuscript Dale sent me at the end of 2020, titled *The Persistence of Religious Experience*.

108. Dale C. Allison Jr., email communication to the author, December 28, 2020.

109. Dale C. Allison Jr., "Looking at a Toilet: Déjà Vu" (unpublished manuscript).

110. Dale C. Allison Jr., "Mary in the Rockies" (unpublished manuscript).

CHAPTER FOUR

1. Adam Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), vii. Crabtree is building on the earlier work of Henri Ellenberger, *Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), who had pointed out this same magnetic origin of modern dynamic psychiatry.

2. Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). Chapter 4, "Returning the Human Sciences to Consciousness," provides more on the topic under discussion here.

3. The definitive study here is William B. Parsons, *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling: Revisioning the Psychoanalytic Theory of Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

4. Ernst Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud: The Last Phase, 1919–1939*, Volume III (New York: Basic Books, 1953), 391–92.

5. Sigmund Freud, *The Letters of Sigmund Freud* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1992), 334.

6. Most recently, see the two-volume masterwork of Alf Hiltebeitel, *Freud's India: Sigmund Freud and India's First Psychoanalyst Girindrasekhar Bose* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Alf Hiltebeitel, *Freud's Mahabharata* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

7. Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Awakened Ones: Phenomenology of Visionary Experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), xi.

8. Ibid., xii. The subtitle is an allusion to Hegel, although this author's vision is "firmly grounded in practice," that is, in Buddhist practice. Ibid., 1.

9. Ibid., 12.

10. Ibid., 29.

11. Ibid., 4.

12. Ibid., 34.

13. Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer, with forewords by Freeman Dyson and Carol Gilligan,

Extraordinary Knowing: Science, Skepticism, and the Inexplicable Powers of the Human Mind (New York: Bantam Books, 2007), 14.

14. Diane Hennacy Powell, *The ESP Enigma: The Scientific Case for Psychic Phenomena* (New York: Walker, 2009), 8.

15. The phrase is a chapter title in ibid., 133.

16. Ibid., 145. I cannot pursue this line of thought here, but disability studies could be engaged at this point, particularly Darold A. Treffert, *Extraordinary People: Understanding Savant Syndrome* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, 2006).

17. Powell, *The ESP Enigma*, 146.

18. Ibid. 208.

19. Ibid., 230.

20. Marsha Hewitt, *Legacies of the Occult: Psychoanalysis, Religion, and Unconscious Communication* (Equinox, 2020), 119.

21. Ibid., 2.

22. Ibid.

23. Hewitt mentions this therapeutic moment in her writing, but I have also heard her talk about it with significant awe (and fear) on different occasions, including a conference panel that we shared, "Synchronicity, Spirituality and Anomalous Phenomena in the Healing of Trauma," Pacifica Institute, January 19, 2021.

24. Hewitt, *Legacies of the Occult*, x.

25. Ibid., xi–xii.

26. Ibid., xiii–xiv.

27. Ibid., 124. The "of" in "an unconscious of the future" is intentionally ambiguous. It is not clear to me whether such emerging abilities are pointing toward some future unconscious or are flowing back from a future consciousness that is only unconscious to us in the present. In any case, I no longer believe in the absoluteness of a one-way linear-causal model of time. I will write more about this in, well, the future.

28. Ibid., 125.

29. Robert P. Baird, "The Invention of Whiteness: The Long History of a Dangerous Idea," *The Guardian*, April 20, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2021/apr/20/the-invention-of-whiteness-long-history-dangerous-idea.

30. W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, introduction by Vann R. Newkirk II, illustrations by Steve Prince (Brooklyn: Restless Book, 2017), 9.

31. See, for example, Cynthia Schrager, "Both Sides of the Veil: Race, Science, and Mysticism in W. E. B. Du Bois," *American Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (1996): 551–86.

32. My thanks to Justine Bakker for pointing this key historical and theological point out to me.

33. See Christopher White, "A Black Fourth Dimension," in *Other Worlds: Spirituality and the Search for Other Dimensions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 93–98.

34. This same basic insight of *Flatland* is also, I should add, what lies behind my running metaphor of the chess game and standing up (into a third dimension) off the two-dimensional game board.

35. I am indebted to this reading of DuBois to my colleague Anthony B. Pinn. Refer to our conversation for the "Connections" podcast at https://humanities.rice.edu/connections-episodes. For Pinn, such an orientation toward the misery of life in turn

sustains the good questioning of what he calls Black moralism and Black humanism, *with no settled answers in sight*.

36. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 102.

37. Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 6.

38. Ibid., 48.

39. Wim M. J. van Binsbergen, *Vicarious Reflections: African Explorations in Empirically-Grounded Intercultural Philosophy* (Shikanda, 2015), 552. I am indebted to my PhD student Nick Collins for this reference.

40. Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 4.

41. I am relying on the "coming out" motif to the queer indigenous actor Blu Hunt. See Nigel Smith, "*The New Mutants'* Blu Hunt: Meet the Queer, Native American Actress Breaking Boundaries in Hollywood," *People*, December 9, 2020, https://people.com/movies/the-new-mutants-blu-hunt-all-about-the-actress/.

42. Yvonne P. Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 14.

43. Jon Woodson, *To Make a New Race: Gurdjieff, Toomer, and the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 31.

44. Ibid., 3.

45. Ibid., 8.

46. Ibid., 21, 16.

47. Ibid., 14.

48. Ibid., 17, quoting Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous*.

49. Ibid., 171, quoting Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous*.

50. Ibid., x.

51. Ibid., 141, 171.

52. For a full study, see G. William Barnard, *Liquid Light: Ayahuasca Visions and Embodying Divinity in the Santo Daime Religious Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).

53. Stephen C. Finley, *In and Out of This World: Material and Extraterrestrial Bodies in the Nation of Islam* (Duke University Press, 2021). Finley has also co-edited a pioneering volume on Black esotericisms: Stephen Finley, Margarita Guillory, Hugh Page Jr., eds., *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience: "There Is a Mystery"* (Leiden: Brill Academic, 2014).

54. Louis Farrakhan, *The Announcement: A Final Warning to the U.S. Government* (Chicago: FCN, 1989), 5–6.

55. See, for example, Ilia Rashad Muhammad, *UFOs and the Nation of Islam: The Source, Proof, and Reality of the Wheels* (Memphis, TN: Nation Brothers, 2013).

56. I am thinking of a few recent documentary films here that have focused on these transnational or postcolonial cases: James Fox's *The Phenomenon* (2020) and Alan Stivelman's *Testigo de otro mundo*, or *Witness of Another World* (2018).

57. See Biko Mandela Gray, "Religion in/and Black Lives Matter: Celebrating the Impossible," *Religion Compass* (2019); and "The Traumatic Mysticism of Othered Others: Blackness, Esotericism, and the Five Percenters," *Correspondences* 7 (2019): 201–37. For the latter esoteric Black movement, see also Michael Muhammad Knight, *The Five Percenters: Islam, Hip-Hop and the Gods of New York* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2008).

58. Onaje X. O. Woodbine, *Take Back What the Devil Stole: An African American Prophet's Encounters in the Spirit World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 176–77.

59. Ibid., 11. For a discussion of Ms. Haskins's supernatural powers, understood and experienced as angelic gifts of the Holy Spirit, see especially chapter 9, "Treasures from Heaven," 173–95.

60. Henry Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, trans. Nancy Pearson (New Lebanon, NY: Omega, 1994/1971), 97. Corbin glossed *"superconsciousness"* with *"transconsciousness"*—a word he likely got from his colleague Mircea Eliade and the latter's influential study of yoga. Ibid., 96.

61. Ibid., 45. Sounds like dual-aspect monism to me.

62. Ibid., 99–101.

63. Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 737–80.

64. For the most recent articulation, see Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (Liveright, 2020).

65. Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness," 748.

66. Ibid., 741.

67. Ibid., 749.

68. Ibid., 751.

69. Ibid., 742.

70. Ibid., 744, 773.

71. Ibid., 751.

72. Ibid., 751.

73. Ibid., 778.

74. Ibid., 739.

75. Ibid., 756.

76. Ibid., 774.

77. Ibid., 750.

78. Ibid., 752.

79. Ibid., 757.

80. Ibid., 758. Moten names here Nishida Kitarō and Franz Fanon.

81. Ibid., 761.

82. Ibid., 753.

83. Deepak Sarma, "Postcolonial Religion: Religion and Its Study after Colonialism," in *Religion: Sources, Perspectives, and Methodologies*, ed. Jeffrey J. Kripal (Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan, 2016), 195–212.

84. See Deepak Sarma, *An Introduction to Madhva Vedanta* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

85. I am indebted to my PhD student Stefan Sanchez for introducing me to Gloria Anzaldúa and for many of the insights that follow. Like Anzaldúa, Stefan grew up in south Texas with multiple religious, magical, and cultural mixings—a border-soul.

86. Like Louis Farrakhan, Anzaldúa interacted closely with figures and texts that most would classify, too quickly and dismissively, as New Age.

87. I am relying for these biographical details and the details of El Valle on Norma Élia Cantú and Aída Hurtado, introduction to Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 4th ed. (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute Book Company, 1987).

88. Ibid., 38.

89. Ibid., 6.

90. Ibid., 39.

91. Gloria Anzaldúa, *interviews/entrevistas*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2000), 108–9.

92. Almost any aspect of sexuality and gender can be addressed today in higher education. You name it, we can talk, teach, and write about it. *Except* for transcendent sexual experiences or what we might call super sexualities, that is, experiences of transcendence or ontological revelation that occur within sexual arousal or during sexual activity. That is where the intellectual generosity and the new words fall silent.

93. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 26.

94. Ibid., 41.

95. Ibid., 60.

96. For a beautiful essay on this same theme, see AnaLouise Keating, "Speculative Realism, Visionary Pragmatism, and Poet-Shamanic Aesthetics in Gloria Anzaldúa—and Beyond," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 3/4 (Fall/Winter 2012): 51–69. For what will likely be the definitive study of the full range and massive complexity of Anzaldúa's thought, please see AnaLouise Keating, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Handbook* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

97. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 91–92.

98. Ibid., 58–59.

99. Ibid., 60.

100. Ibid., 19, 59. The capitalization of "Self" is a likely allusion to nondual Hindu ideas and teachers that would have been prominent in that part of California at that time. AnaLouise Keating tells me that Sri Aurobindo (a major Indian interpreter of the evolving Superman in the first half of the twentieth century) was an early influence on Anzaldúa.

101. Ibid., 61.

102. Ibid., 38–39.

103. Ibid., 61.

104. Ibid., 93.

105. Anzaldúa, *interviews/entrevistas*, 284. Such obvious empirical psychic claims are denied by the comfortable notion that Anzaldúa was writing only of changing "social reality" (for an example, see the otherwise fine introduction to the fourth edition of Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 7). Please stop.

106. Ibid., 64–65. AnaLouise Keating points out that she is also referring here to a hormonal condition that led to full-blown menses at the age of six.

107. Ibid., 67.

108. Ibid., 19.

109. Ibid., 57.

110. Ibid., 66. I have commented elsewhere on how the right side of the brain registers the top half of the human face, especially the eyes. I suspect that when individuals report large-eyed entities or "aliens," they are "seeing" through their right brains.

111. Ibid., 106–7.

112. Ibid., 101.

113. Ibid., 100. Anzaldúa is probably being too generous here. In any case, her *mestiza* consciousness goes well beyond Vasconcelos. My thanks to AnaLouise Keating for this observation.

114. Ibid., 101.

115. Ibid., 102.

116. Ibid., 73.

117. Ibid.

118. Ibid., 72.

119. AnaLouise Keating confirmed this hunch of mine. This book is, indeed, listed in Anzaldúa's library at the time of her death.

120. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 103.

121. Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark, Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriing Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

122. Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

123. Quoted in Morgan Meis, "Timothy Morton's Hyper-Pandemic," *The New Yorker*, June 8, 2021, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/timothy-mortons-hyper-pandemic.

124. Ibid.

125. Timothy Morton, *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People* (Location: Verso, 2019).

126. Ibid., 145–62.

127. Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 9.

128. Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 5.

129. Ibid.

130. Ibid., 15.

131. Amitav Ghosh, "Can the Non-human Speak? Other Beings in Myth, Literature and Ethnography," The Campbell Lectures, Rice University, September 14, 2021. These two lectures were drawn from *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021). The expression "hidden forces" is an allusion to the 1900 novel *The Hidden Force* by the Dutch writer Louis Couperus, whose colonial occult occlusions Ghosh discusses at length in *The Nutmeg's Curse*.

132. Amitav Ghosh, *Gun Island* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), 42–43.

133. Ibid., 7.

134. Ibid., 167

135. These features include the observation that Dinanath read Batman and Superman comics as a kid. Ibid., 6.

136. Ibid., 228.

137. Ibid., 141.

138. Ibid., 141. Ghosh is not referring to the evolutionary origins of story here, but I am.

139. Ibid., 146.

140. Ibid., 227. Since snakes and spiders are so closely aligned in the story, it is not unreasonable to posit an intertextual connection between Ernesto de Martino's study of tarantism, which is discussed by Cinta early in the book, and Tipu getting bitten by a king cobra in a temple to the Goddess of Snakes in the Sundarbans and subsequently becoming psychic in his trances or "fits."

141. Ibid., 201.

142. Ernesto de Martino, *The Land of Remorse: A Study of Southern Italian Tarantism*, trans. Dorothy Zinn (London: Free Association Books, 2005).

143. Ghosh, *Gun Island*, 38–39.

144. Ibid., 141. Ghosh ends this sentence with a rhetorical question mark. He is referring, in my own language now, to the paranormal power of telling and being told by stories.

145. Ibid., 272. The adjective is likely a literary allusion to Manasa Devi, the Goddess of Snakes.

146. Ibid., 273–74.

147. Ibid., 280.

148. Ibid., 286.

149. Ibid., 304–5.

150. Ibid., 236–37.

151. Ibid., 221.

152. See Rachael Petersen, "Taking Mushrooms for Depression Cured Me of My Atheism," *The Outline*, April 29, 2019, https://theoutline.com/post/7367/taking-mushrooms-for-depression-cured-me-of-my-atheism?zd=1&zi=c3pcsxs3.

153. D.C.A. Hillman, *The Chemical Muse: Drug Use and the Roots of Western Civilization* (New York: St. Martin's, 2008).

154. Brian C. Muraresku, *The Immortality Key: The Secret History of the Religion with No Name* (New York: St. Martin's, 2020).

155. Marcus Boon, *The Road of Excess: A History of Writers on Drugs* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

156. Michael Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us about Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence* (New York: Penguin, 2018).

157. See our shared panel with Reverend Rita Powell, "Medicalizing Mysticism: Religion in Contemporary Psychedelic Trials," for the Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HkbXqGokOMo.

CONCLUSION

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unpublished Fragments from the Period of Thus Spoke Zarathustra (Summer 1882–Winter 1883/84),* trans. Paul S. Loeb and David F. Tinsley, vol. 14 of *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Alan D. Schrift and Duncan Large (Menlo Park, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 525.

2. C.G. Jung, *Nietzsche's* Zarathustra*: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1934–1939 by C.G. Jung*, ed. James L. Jarrett, in two volumes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 925.

3. Ibid., 771.

4. I cannot pursue this idea here, but this implicit or necessary procreative heterosexuality of Nietzsche's vision of the coming superhumans sets this evolutionary esotericism apart from virtually every orthodox mystical tradition of which I am personally aware (SB 30–45), with the possible exception of some Asian Tantric traditions.

5. Julian Huxley was a well-known public scientist who helped found the department of biology at my own institution. Julian thought that there is "one world stuff" that manifests both material and mental properties depending on whether it is viewed from without (matter) or from within (mind). He also took at least some of the anomalous

or psychical capacities of human beings very seriously, that is, as natural evolutionary outcomes. The core of Julian's evolutionary humanism was the idea that "man is that part of reality in which and through which the cosmic process has become conscious and has begun to comprehend itself." Our purpose here, our "supreme task," is "to increase that conscious comprehension and to apply it as fully as possible to guide the course of events." This was our new "religion without revelation," our present and future evolutionary humanism. See Julian Huxley, *Religion Without Revelation* (London: Max Parrish, 1959), 236. I am relying here on John G. Messerly, "Julian Huxley, Evolution, and Meaning," at the blog "Reason and Meaning: Philosophical Reflections on Life Death, and the Meaning of Life," at https://reasonandmeaning.com/2014/02/24/evolutionary-biology-and-the-meaning-of-life/.

6. Jung, *Nietzsche's* Zarathustra, 839.

7. Ibid., 391.

8. Robert Ford Campany, *Making Transcendents: Ascetics and Social Memory in Early Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2016), xv.

9. I am indebted to my PhD student Christopher Senn for the key phrase "society is a séance."

10. Quoted in Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3.

11. See also Cambridge paleontologist Simon Conway Morris, *The Runes of Evolution: How the Universe Became Self-Aware* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2015). Morris ends this massive book with an invocation of *Authors of the Impossible* and an epilogue exactly in line with my thinking as articulated there and here.

12. Harald Atmanspacher, personal email communication to Michael Murphy and Jeffrey Kripal, September 21, 2020.

13. Serinity Young, *Women Who Fly: Goddesses, Witches, Mystics, and Other Airborne Females* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

14. Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 238.

15. G. William Barnard, *Living Consciousness: The Metaphysical Vision of Henri Bergson* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 234.

16. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2005), 177, italics in original.

17. Ibid.

18. I have written about how "the cosmos is human" and the "human is cosmic," particularly in *The Flip: Who You Are and Why It Matters* (London: Penguin, 2020). By such phrases, I mean pretty much what Bergson means here by the human "ground of evolution." I do *not* mean that this particular primate body and biological form is somehow necessary, much less that it represents the peak of cosmic evolution. That would be ridiculous. I mean rather that the evolutionary force is conscious, like the universe itself, and that this human form happens to be one of its most reflexive and aware expressions in this particular physical environment.

19. Bergson, *The Two Sources*, 237–38.

20. Ibid., 235.

21. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 163–64.

22. Bergson, *The Two Sources*, 65, 66, 84.

23. Ibid., 99–100. Bergson's "true mystics," that is, his privileging of Christian or

theistic mysticism over, say, Hindu and Buddhist nontheistic forms is problematic but makes some sense given the historical situation and the lack of adequate comparative scholarship. Basically, he privileged theistic forms of mystical experience that resulted in ethical action and social transformation. He stood against forms that led to ascetic withdrawal, complete detachment, or nonaction. I do not share this judgment.

24. Mark Fox, *The Fifth Love: Exploring Accounts of the Extraordinary* (Spirit and Sage, 2014).

25. I consider the quantum real to shimmer on the furthest edges or future horizons of humanistic thought. I wrote but then did not include a discussion of it for chapter 4 as "Reality as Two." The section title was an allusion to the famous complementarity principle of Danish physicist Niels Bohr on the dual particle/wave nature of quantum phenomena and whether this strange duality should be construed epistemologically or ontologically—that is, as "in here" as a limitation of our scientific knowing or "out there" as a fundamental indeterminacy of physical reality. I did not finally include the essay, mostly because I am not yet settled on the topic, if indeed one can be settled (seems appropriate). The philosophers of religion Mary-Jane Rubenstein and Catherine Keller are among a small but gifted group of humanist writers who see *and pursue* the implications of the quantum revolution for our present order of knowledge. See Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Pantheologies: Gods, Worlds, Monsters* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); and Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). I also discussed some of the implications of the new quantum real for the philosophy of mind in *The Flip*.

EPILOGUE

1. Alana Eisenbarth, *The Apocalypse of Eve, ii. Aurora of the Philosophers* (Middletown, DE: Light Realm Books, 2019), 38.

2. Ibid., 34, 71.

3. Ibid., 31.

4. Ibid., 101. In Gnostic thought, the archons are those astral daemons of fate who control the world. In modern academic-speak, they are those historical and material forces by which we are entirely constructed, conditioned, determined: "We have no mind of our own but the mind they control. Can't you see, Adam? Can't you hear?" Ibid., 97. The answer to the archons is clear: "Do not be afraid. The you that exists around you can be unmade." Ibid., 50.

5. Ibid., 82, 80, 69.

6. Ibid., 87.

7. Ibid., 83, 80.

8. Ibid., 74.

9. Ibid., 15.

10. Ibid., 69.

11. Eisenbarth does routinely reference the chakras (literally, "circles") or subtle energy centers of the human form, a clear signal of the presence of a Tantrically inflected kundalini yoga process.

12. Ibid., 97.

13. Alana Eisenbarth, *The Girl Who Thought She Was God, i. Aurora of the Philosophers* (Light Realm Books, 2019), 90. Compare such lines as this: "What if one day you awoke to a serpent rising in your head?" Eisenbarth, *The Apocalypse*, 6.

14. Ibid., 29. See also ibid., 15.

15. Ibid. 52. Or again: "There the seraph lingered and I mouth agape felt a dry, barbed ball shot into my gullet."

16. Eisenbarth, *The Girl*, 90–91. Just a comparative observation: such slithering details, even the *kriya* movements, are nearly identical to what individuals report on ayahuasca, the psychoactive brew of the Amazonian basin discussed above. If I had to guess, I would guess an endogenous DMT release is active here.

17. For an excellent discussion of orbital meditation in Chinese Daoist yoga, see Douglas Wile, *Art of the Bedchamber: The Chinese Sexual Yoga Classics Including Women's Solo Meditation Texts* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

18. The very detailed descriptions of an esoteric orbital presence in the human body are explored for thousands of pages in the teachings and books of Adi Da, who understood himself in Hindu mythical terms as an Avatar or "Descent" of God. See my "Riding the Dawn Horse: Adi Da and the Eros of Nonduality," in *Gurus in America*, ed. Thomas Forsthoefel and Cynthia Anne Humess (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005). Another superhuman, of the most extraordinary sort.

19. Eisenbarth, *Apocalypse*, 52.

20. Ibid., 17.

21. Ibid., 34, 42. For "The Serpent as Gift," see ibid., 66–67.

22. Ibid., 20. This statement is really a rhetorical question in the original context, but the entire series of books shouts the author's answer.

23. Ibid., 7.

24. Eisenbarth, *The Girl*, 96.

25. Ibid., 1.

26. Ibid., 8.

27. Eisenbarth, *The Girl*, 25.

28. Ibid., 70.

29. Ibid., 29, 48.

30. Ibid., 64–65.

31. Eisenbarth, *Apocalypse*, 83.

32. See April D. DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion from Antiquity to Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

33. Alana Eisenbarth, personal communication, February 9, 2021.

34. As we saw above, in chapter 2, this empirical "backward-willing" is one of the central theses of Paul S. Loeb, *The Death of Nietzsche's Zarathustra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). I will discuss Loeb and his ideas at length in my next book, which will be the first volume of my Super Story trilogy. The present epilogue, then, is a kind of seed essay of that future book and, indeed, of that series.

35. See, for example, Eisenbarth, *The Girl*, 62–64.

36. The cited lines here and just above are taken from Eisenbarth's conference abstracts attached to the email of September 18, 2020.

37. Eisenbarth, *The Girl*, 122.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND THE SIGIL

1. Paul Bishop, *On the Blissful Islands with Nietzsche and Jung: In the Shadow of the Superman* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

INDEX

INDEXING THE SUPER. I have written an index that suggests how I think about the book, how I connect the dots. Hence the index begins with a silent but firm affirmation of both sides of the superhuman, the ontological and the social-moral. In a different direction, the entry on "dream" is rather light but points the reader instead to "precognition," which is quite rich and reflects well my present (or future) thought. But what on earth do anomalous abilities have against dinnerware? (Go to "spoons.") In short, there is a particular reading, mischievous at times, embedded in the following list of words and page numbers.

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